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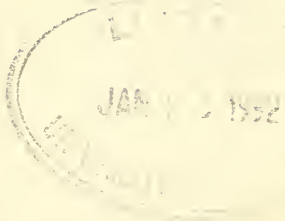
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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THE
LIGHT BEYOND

BY
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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THE LIGHT BEYOND

BOOK I

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Book One

Chapter I

OF the three men who lunched together at the corner table at the Ritz, Raoul de Fontanay was perhaps the most distinguished in appearance, Henry Dorchester the best-looking, and Van Stratton the most attractive. In their outlook upon life, as well as in their personal tastes, they were so far removed from one another that their friendship was an easy thing. Not one of the three was in the least disputative, and controversy merely added an appetite to discussion. They even ventured, on this particular May morning, to speak of the other sex.

"To lunch without women," Raoul de Fontanay observed, "is now and then a relief."

"If one would converse seriously," Dorchester assented, "it is a necessity. Women are too distracting. They force our thoughts into an absolutely fanciful groove. They make rational conversation impossible. I am convinced that the realisation of this fact is the reason why our forefathers banished them from the dining-table at the earliest possible opportunity."

"Better not let any of my countrywomen hear you speak like that," Van Stratton observed.

The Frenchman smiled.

"Your countrywomen are adorable," he declared,

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"but if they have a fault, it is that they take themselves too seriously. They will not admit or recognise the impassable boundaries which divide the sexes. I cannot talk to a woman seriously; I need a man to understand what I am aiming at—to understand what I would hope and work for. Woman is our best helpmate when she leaves our careers alone, when she is simply amusing and beautiful, and perhaps affectionate."

"That is all very well for one's mistress," Dorchester conceded, "but no one in this country, at any rate, can altogether keep his wife out of the serious side of his life."

"You English!" Raoul de Fontanay murmured, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "Ah, well! . . . Still, as we must talk of women, let us ask one another this; we are all fond of them, and yet not one of us is married or even engaged. How does that come about?"

"I shall marry some day," Dorchester announced. "Up to now, my work has been too absorbing."

"I have looked around," Mark Van Stratton admitted, "but so far—well, there doesn't seem to have been anything doing. I admire Frenchwomen more than any in the world, but they're a trifle too exigent for us Americans. They either keep you dangling at their heels all the time, or else, in the most charming way possible, fill your place. The English girls I have met are all right for sport, but they are either too reserved, and cold, or so slangy they're almost incomprehensible, and a bit too quick off the mark. I suppose when I do marry, it will be one of my own countrywomen."

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"As for me," Raoul de Fontanay pronounced, "I am the only one of us who has a logical reason for his celibacy. I shall never marry, because there is something ugly to me in infidelity, and I am too conscious of my limitations. I could never be faithful for a lifetime, or a quarter of it. What about you, Mark?"

The young American had been looking steadfastly across the room. His face had become curiously intent, his eyes fixed. He did not reply for a moment. Then he drew a little breath, and answered without withdrawing his gaze.

"I could be faithful all my life," he declared, "to the girl who has just come in, and whom I shall probably some day marry—the girl in grey with the chinchilla furs and the rose-coloured hat."

The speech itself might have sounded banal, but for Van Stratton's intense earnestness—an earnestness which his two friends realised from the first.

"This is distinctly intriguing," Raoul de Fontanay declared, thrusting his monocle into his eye, and looking across the room.

"Thrilling," Dorchester assented. "A trifle on the melodramatic side, perhaps, but atoned for by Mark's obvious earnestness. Would it be possible, without exciting too much attention, to indicate the favoured lady?"

"You cannot possibly mistake her," Mark replied. "There is no one else. She is just sitting down now, facing you, at the table by the window, with an elderly man. She is in grey, with some chinchilla furs, and a sort of crushed rose-coloured hat. She is not the most beautiful, but she certainly is the most attractive girl I have ever seen in my life."

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De Fontanay glanced in the direction indicated and his manner changed a little. He dropped his monocle, and whistled softly under his breath. Dorchester seemed to have caught his friend's enthusiasm.

"She's awfully good-looking," he pronounced, "like a piece of Dresden china. Who is she, Mark?"

"I don't know—yet."

"I do," de Fontanay answered. "I know her name, at any rate. That is her father with her."

"Tell us her name then—quickly," Mark demanded. De Fontanay's surprise was obvious.

"Do you mean to say that you neither of you know who he is?"

"I have no idea whatever," Mark confessed.

"Neither have I," Dorchester affirmed.

Raoul de Fontanay sipped his wine approvingly. He had a sense of the dramatic, and he paused for a moment to give weight to his words—besides, the wine was of a wonderful vintage, and far too good to be hurried over.

"That," he confided, "is one of the best known men on paper and the least known personally in the world. The Press, when they try to find adjectives for him, are sometimes lyrical, sometimes hysterical. Sometimes he is the world's greatest hero, the mightiest potentate of modern times; at others he is the direct descendant of Barrabas, riding one of the evil steeds of the Apocalypse, spreading ruin and destruction over a stricken world. It depends entirely upon which side of the market you are on. That is Felix Dukane."

"Felix Dukane!" Mark gasped.

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"Dukane!" Dorchester repeated wonderingly. "He isn't in the least like what I expected."

"There is a personality to excite one's imagination!" de Fontanay continued. "He is very seldom seen in a restaurant—very seldom seen anywhere, as a matter of fact. They say that he has never been interviewed in his life, and that he beat the only photographer who ever succeeded in taking a snapshot of him, with a loaded stick which he always carries, and smashed the camera. Look at those shoulders! You would have to respect them if you were his enemy, for he is really prodigiously strong."

Mark's national respect for wealth kept him a little awed. Dorchester's imagination was fired with this unexpected encounter with the "Mystery Man" of the world.

"Felix Dukane!" the former muttered. "The only man who single-handed has ever created a panic in Wall Street."

"It isn't his enormous wealth alone," de Fontanay observed, "but he has the power of raising more money than any other born financier. If he speaks the word, the banks in London, New York and Paris obey. I should call him the most unwholesome factor in modern finance. It is a wicked thing for any one man to be able to influence the money market of the world in the way he does."

"I wonder," Dorchester reflected, "what he is doing in London?"

"I, too, am curious," de Fontanay confessed, "for, to tell you the truth, it is the one city which he dislikes, and seldom visits. There must be some mischief brewing."

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Mark remained profoundly uninterested in all such considerations.

"Say, Raoul," he demanded, "how is it, if you know the old man, that you have never met the daughter?"

"Alas," the Frenchman replied, "how does one obtain the chance? Socially, Dukane does not exist. People in every capital have grown tired of sending him invitations; he never even answers them. I chanced to see them both in Monte Carlo last season. They arrived in his yacht, and they left within the week—people said because he was annoyed at the sensation his presence had created."

"Of what nationality is he?" Mark enquired.

"No one knows exactly. I believe his passport would describe him as English. His wife, I know, was a Greek. She was the daughter of a former Prime Minister. I never saw her, but I remember her being spoken of in Paris as a famous beauty."

"Listen here, Raoul," Mark continued, "if you've never met the daughter, do you know the father well enough to present me?"

De Fontanay shook his head thoughtfully.

"I am afraid that I do not," he acknowledged. "With anyone else in the world, I would try to gratify you, but Felix Dukane is a law unto himself. Observe the way he looks round the room. His stare is absolutely stony. He has probably recognised me long ago, but I doubt whether he will take the slightest notice of my existence."

"That seems unfortunate," Mark said doggedly, "because I've got to get to know her somehow, and it must be soon."

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"As a matter of fact," Dorchester affirmed, with unusual seriousness, "I, too, am interested."

The service of luncheon proceeded, but the continuity of the discussion between the three men seemed to have become broken, and conversation was only fitful. The attention of both Dorchester and Mark seemed entirely engrossed by observation more or less surreptitious of the table at which Felix Dukane and his daughter were seated. De Fontanay, whose turn it was that day to be host, suffered their neglect patiently, and even watched them both with slightly cynical amusement. As they passed out of the restaurant at the conclusion of the luncheon, he took each by the arm, and spoke half bantering of their obsession.

"My friends," he said, "it is a fact that both of you regard women a little more seriously than I—racial instinct, perhaps. Well, let me tell you this: the joy of a woman's love is great, but the joy of such a friendship as exists between us three is, I think, a greater thing. You will not forget it, either of you?"

"Of course not," Dorchester assented firmly.

"Sure thing," Mark murmured a little mechanically.

"That being clearly understood," de Fontanay continued, "I will expose myself to rebuff, and do my best to present you both to the young lady. We will take our coffee at one of the lower tables. The opportunity will thus occur."

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Book One

Chapter II

THE three men found a table in the lounge which commanded a view of the departing guests, and the eyes of two of them scarcely ever wandered from the exit to the restaurant. They still conversed, but in a disconnected fashion, and under Mark's manner there was always a vein of almost feverish impatience. At last the inevitable happened.

"They're coming right along now," the latter declared eagerly, "You'll have to look alive, Raoul. The old man seems to be in a hurry."

De Fontanay, with a little gesture of resignation, rose to his feet, and the two young men leaned forward, their eyes fixed upon the advancing pair. There was not the slightest personal resemblance between father and daughter. Felix Dukane was a short man, powerfully built, with a head large in proportion to his body, and a protruding under lip. He had masses of grey-black hair, a pallid complexion and cold, grey eyes, set, as he walked down the carpeted way from the restaurant, in a hard, unseeing stare. The girl by his side possessed without a doubt those insidious gifts of charm which, coupled with an exquisite physique alike defy description and disarm criticism. She was a trifle taller than her father, slim, with light brown hair, coiffured in the Italian fashion, hazel eyes, which looked about her with pleasant curiosity, the smooth, perfect complexion of youth and health, a mouth large, but wonderfully attractive, with indications of humour in its sensitive corners. Whilst her father's one object seemed to be to get out of the place

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as speedily as possible, to look at no one, to remain unrecognised if possible, she, on the other hand, showed some disposition towards loitering, and was obviously taking in her surroundings with a certain amount of interest and pleasure. De Fontanay, summoning up all his courage, as he afterwards confessed, intercepted Dukane with a courteous bow, and outstretched hand.

"This is the first time, I think, Mr. Dukane, that I have had the pleasure of meeting you in London," he remarked. "You will remember that we met at the French Embassy in Rome, and subsequently at the President's week-end party at Rambouillet. My name is de Fontanay—Colonel Raoul de Fontanay."

"I remember you, Colonel," Dukane admitted, without rudeness, but certainly without enthusiasm.

"You will perhaps give me the great pleasure," the other continued, "of presenting me to your daughter?"

The introduction was made, stiffly enough by Dukane, but accepted with obvious pleasure by the young lady. The three stood talking together pleasantly enough, yet even then the final issue of de Fontanay's efforts on his friends' behalf appeared to be in doubt. Felix Dukane's manner had lost none of its brusqueness, and he showed distinct signs of a desire to escape. The two young men in the background sat and watched anxiously, conversing in nervous undertones.

"I am forced to acknowledge, Mark," Dorchester confided, "that you have better taste than I gave you credit for. With one possible exception, I should say that Felix Dukane's daughter is the most attractive young woman I have ever seen."

"I guess that shows you don't know what you're

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talking about then," was the gruff retort. "There couldn't be an exception."

Dorchester tapped a cigarette upon the table, and lit it.

"The times have gone by," he answered, "when it would have been my duty to encase myself in unwieldy armour, mount a spirited dray horse and perform prodigies of valour with the most ineffectual weapon the mind of man ever conceived, to prove—Mark, they're coming! Good old Raoul! He's brought it off!"

De Fontanay had indeed succeeded, by the only strategy possible—by making a request and anticipating the reply. The girl had readily enough followed his lead. The enterprise was smoothly and successfully concluded.

"Mademoiselle," de Fontanay said, "will you permit that I present to you my two friends—Lord Henry Dorchester, Mr. Van Stratton—Miss Dukane, Mr. Felix Dukane. I have persuaded Mr. and Miss Dukane to take coffee with us."

Attentive waiters hurried up with chairs, and the little party subsided into a semicircle, the cynosure for many eyes as the identity of the small man with the big head, the "Mystery Millionaire" of finance began to be whispered about. Dukane responded to his host's courteous attempts at conversation with cold monosyllables. He had the air of a man who is unwillingly submitting to a social act which he would have avoided if possible. It was Dorchester who first engaged the young lady's attention. They talked for several moments of trifles. Then during a temporary lapse in the conversation, she turned with a flash of

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graciousness towards Mark, as though desirous of including him.

"You are an American?" she enquired.

"I am," he answered, "although I am afraid not a very patriotic one. Most of my time is spent over on this side."

"I was in New York last year," she confided. "A very wonderful place! My father was immersed in business all the time, however, and I was a little dull. Tell me—your friend Lord Henry's profession, I know; only last week I heard him speak in the House of Commons; and Colonel de Fontanay is of course a famous soldier—how do you interest yourself in life?"

For a moment, Mark was taken aback. The directness of the question, the friendly yet inquisitive regard of her bewildering eyes almost embarrassed him.

"I am afraid," he confessed, "that I am rather what they call over here a 'slacker.' There are more of them on this side than in my country, as a rule. Of course, there was the War. Since then I haven't done anything particular."

"You play games, do you not? I have seen your name amongst the polo players. I think I saw you play once at Ranelagh."

"It is quite likely," he admitted.

"But when the season for games passes?" she persisted. "How do you spend your time then? You have still perhaps business affairs to attend to. In your country these become so absorbing that you men sometimes find leisure for little else."

He shook his head.

"I know better than to attempt anything of the sort," he confided. "Banking in Wall Street is rather

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too intricate an affair for an amateur to meddle with. When I left college, I went to Washington for a time. I had some idea of studying diplomacy. They sent me down to two places in South America, but I couldn't seem to make good anyway. Then the War came, and since then—well, I've just drifted around."

She had the air of beginning to lose interest in him. Mark noticed it, and sought desperately to re-establish himself.

"Of course," he argued, "it's all very well for Dorchester. He is living in his own country, and he has his own interests and the interests of his class to work for. For me there is nothing. America doesn't need men of my kind, who have no commercial training. If I were to try, for instance, to manage my own affairs over there, it would simply mean that money would be wasted."

"A somewhat indolent excuse," she murmured disapprovingly. "Why not return to diplomacy?"

"I thought of it once," he admitted.

She turned away, and addressed some remark to de Fontanay, whose gallant efforts to entertain Dukane had come momentarily to an end. Mark had a queer and disconcerting feeling that he had somehow fallen into disfavour with the one person in the world he was most anxious to conciliate. He watched her admiringly, the eloquent turn of her head, her white neck with its single row of beautiful pearls, her full, unbecarmined lips, the transparent, untouched complexion. He watched her smile, and found it adorable—a smile accompanied by the deepening of the fascinating little lines at the corners of her eyes. She was discussing with de Fontanay the poetry of a Russian

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whom they had both met in Paris, and for the first time Mark realised that she possessed, notwithstanding the precision of her speech, distinct traces of a foreign accent—an accent, however, which seemed to make her voice even more attractive. He leaned forward, and, taking his courage into his hands, addressed her father.

“ You live in Paris, don’t you, sir ? ” he asked. “ I remember once having your house in the Bois pointed out to me.”

“ It is my headquarters,” Dukane admitted. “ I have, however, a *pied-à-terre* in a good many places. Just now my affairs make it necessary that I stay some time in London.”

“ You are spending the season here, you and your daughter ? ” Mark continued eagerly.

Dukane knocked the ash from the cigar which de Fontanay had persuaded him to light.

“ I don’t know what you mean by the ‘ season,’ ” he answered. “ Social things do not interest me. I am here for another six weeks, or two months, until certain affairs in which I am concerned are concluded. When they are, I shall get away as soon as I can. The English climate and cooking are the worst in the world. What did you say your name was ? ”

“ Van Stratton,” Mark replied, a little taken aback by the abruptness of the question.

“ And you’re American ? Are you connected in any way with the firm of Van Stratton and Arbuthnot of Wall Street ? ”

“ My grandfather founded the business, I am the only Van Stratton left.”

“ Your grandfather then,” Felix Dukane declared,

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"was one of the shrewdest men of his generation. You have still interests in the firm?"

"All my interests are in it," Mark assented—"my financial ones, that is to say. I am not a banker myself though."

Felix Dukane looked at him keenly—appraisingly, as Mark felt. There was something covert about the intensity of his regard.

"It is a pity," he said. "I could give you good advice. Your people are still money-makers, but they are too conservative. Modern banking requires new methods."

The girl turned suddenly back to Mark. She had apparently concluded her conversation with de Fontanay, who was leaning back in his chair with the satisfied air of one who has just produced a successful repartee.

"Colonel de Fontanay is too literary to be human," she declared. "Are you a great reader, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I am afraid not," he confessed, a little gloomily, "and I am afraid that, except for one or two of my favourites, what I do read in a general way could scarcely be called literature."

She concentrated upon him a regard which might almost have been termed critical. He was over six feet, with broad shoulders and long athletic body, with the blue eyes and fair hair of his Dutch ancestors, but little of their stolidity. His expression at the moment was certainly a little anxious and discontented, but he had by no means the appearance of a man lacking in intelligence. De Fontanay had bravely resumed his attempts at conversation with Dukane,

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a passing acquaintance had paused to speak to Dorchester. Mark and his companion were practically isolated.

"Should you very much resent a word of advice from a complete stranger?" she asked, dropping her voice a little.

"If you mean yourself, I should welcome it," was the eager reply. "You see, if you took so much interest in me as to offer it, I should feel that after all we were not complete strangers. I don't feel that way myself at all."

She laughed softly. His intense earnestness redeemed his speech from any suggestion of impertinence.

"Very well then," she continued, "I will speak to you not as a stranger, but as a friend. If, by any chance, the opportunity should come for you to take up some useful work—I do not mean wasting time in Bolivia or Ecuador or one of those terrible countries, but if at any time you should have a position offered you which meant a certain amount of responsibility, but which occupied some of your idle time, promise me not to refuse it."

He was a little bewildered, but he did not hesitate.

"I won't refuse anything," he assured her. "If I am offered a job as Consul to the North Pole, or President of the United States, I'll take either on if you wish me to."

"Brave man!" she murmured, under her breath. "Don't forget."

She rose to her feet in response to an imperative gesture from her father, and after farewells, which the latter's impatience restricted to the merest conventionalities, they took their leave. The three men resumed their seats.

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"Well?" de Fontanay enquired, as he lit a fresh cigarette.

"She is just as wonderful as I knew she would be," Mark declared fervently.

"She is the most attractive human being I have ever met," Dorchester pronounced. "Ambitious, too,—no use for idlers. She is coming down to the House to hear me speak one day next week. I warn you, Mark, that if you are in earnest, you may possibly find in me a rival."

There was a gleam of cynical amusement in de Fontanay's eyes as he leaned back and laughed softly.

"I suppose in your way," he mused, "you are both of you eligible enough 'partis.' You, Henry, the son of a peer—second in succession, by-the-by, aren't you?—and Mark here, a millionaire. All the same," he went on, with a note of seriousness in his tone, "when Estelle Dukane makes up her mind to marry, her father could buy her a kingdom if he chose. If either of you two are in earnest, take my advice and forget it."

Book One

Chapter III

MR. STEPHEN WIDDOWES, Ambassador from the Government of the United States to the Court of St. James, a pleasant, dignified-looking man of slightly over middle age, was standing upon the pavement waiting for his car as Mark left the hotel. The latter

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raised his hat respectfully, and would have passed on. The Ambassador, however, detained him.

"Just the man I was looking for, Mark!" he exclaimed. "Are you in a hurry for half an hour?"

"Nothing whatever to do, sir, this afternoon," was the prompt admission.

"Step in and drive round with me to Carlton House then," the other invited. "I have a few little matters to look after down there. They won't take me more than a few minutes. Brownlow was writing to you this evening."

Mark, mystified but interested, accepted the invitation, and entered the car. During the short drive his companion spoke only of the weather and some mutual family friends. Arrived at the Embassy, he led the way to his own study where Brownlow, his private secretary, was at work.

"Anything urgent?" the Ambassador enquired.

"Nothing of any importance, sir. They have rung up from Whitehall once or twice, but we were able to deal with their enquiries."

"That's good. You know Mark Van Stratton?"

The two young men exchanged greetings.

"Of course you do, though," the Ambassador continued, "you were at Harvard together, weren't you, and you must have met here. Give us a few minutes, Brownlow. I want to have a word or two with this young man."

"I have to go down to the Consul's office, if you can spare me for half an hour, sir."

"Capital! Don't be longer if you can help it."

Mr. Widdowes waited until the door was closed.

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Then he motioned his visitor to a chair and seated himself at his desk.

"Am I correct in believing, Mark," he began, "that you have so far imbibed English habits as to be living the life of a gentleman at ease?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it, sir," the other admitted. "Since the War I am afraid I have led rather a useless existence."

"Should you like some work?"

The question was so unexpected that it came almost as a shock. Mark's thoughts flashed back to the Ritz, to the girl leaning towards him, her earnest, almost mysterious admonition. If this was coincidence it was coincidence of an amazing sort.

"What kind of work, sir?" he enquired.

"We need help here badly," Mr. Widdowes explained. "We have all we can do at any time. They don't over-staff us, as you know, and perhaps you've heard—we've lost Dimsdale. Influenza, or something of the sort. He's going home by the next steamer."

"Sorry to hear that, sir," Mark ventured. "He always seemed so keen."

Mr. Widdowes sighed.

"Well, anyhow, he's gone, and I don't know exactly where to replace him for the moment."

"Do you think I should be of any use, sir?" Mark asked eagerly.

"Of course you would," was the prompt reply. "Anyway, I want you to try. You could relieve Brownlow here of some of the social stunts he has to get up for Mrs. Widdowes—takes him half his day sometimes to make out her party lists. The work won't be strenuous, of course. All that we need is

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someone who knows the social ropes pretty well, and can keep a still tongue in his head if any other little matter happens to come along. Can you dine to-night?"

"I have no engagement, sir."

"Capital! We'll have a further talk after dinner. Come early—say, about a quarter to eight. Mrs. Widdowes may want you to help her. She misses Ned rather when we have guests."

Mark was dismissed with a kindly nod, and walked out feeling a little dazed. With his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets he stood upon the pavement for several seconds. The Ambassador's offer was not, after all, such a surprising one, as Mark was on cordial terms with the family, and the suggestion of his re-entering the diplomatic service had once or twice cropped up in the course of conversation. The coincidence was that the offer should have come on this precise day. "She couldn't possibly have guessed," he reflected. "It's odd, though—damned odd!" . . .

Instead of turning back into Pall Mall, Mark descended the steps and turned towards the Strand, meaning to call upon some friends in the Savoy Court. After a few yards, he turned up the collar of his coat, for the mist which had been hanging about all day was changing into rain, and towards the river there were signs of fog. He had only proceeded a short distance, however, when a long two-seater car, driven by a girl, passed him at a great speed and suddenly, with a discordant grinding of brakes, was brought to a standstill by the kerb a little way ahead. The girl looked round and waved to him. Mark, recognising her with a thrill of pleasure, raised his hat and hurried forward

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"Have I splashed you?" she asked. "If so, I am very sorry. It was wonderful seeing you so unexpectedly. Jump in, please."

Her invitation, surprising though it was, seemed as she delivered it, to be the most natural thing in the world. Mark obeyed without hesitation, and in a moment they were off again. She was seated very low amongst the cushions, and was completely enveloped in a macintosh driving coat, but she wore no veil, and he realised at once that there was a change in her since luncheon-time. She had lost that becoming tinge of colour, her eyes were set and her expression strained.

"I cannot talk to you yet," she explained during the short distance they traversed before reaching the Arch. "I wish to drive as quickly as I can, and the traffic is always terrible getting to Northumberland Avenue. I am taking you down to my father's office in Norfolk Street."

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I cannot tell you about it now."

"Don't worry," he begged her. "If I can help I'll be proud. Get right along with your driving. If you're stalled I can take the wheel. I have one of these cars myself."

She nodded, but it was soon very clear that she needed no help. She threaded her way through the maelstrom of traffic to Northumberland Avenue with scarcely a pause, and, regardless of the disapproving glance of the policeman on duty, swept down on to the Embankment, raced along under the arch, and bearing a little to the left, turned up one of the streets leading to the Strand. At the third house on the

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left she paused. There was a powerful-looking commissionaire at the door, but no brass plate, or any indication as to the nature of the premises.

"This is where my father interviews people whom he does not wish to meet in the city," she confided. "Come this way, please."

Mark followed her into the building. There was nothing whatever to denote the fact that he was in a private retreat of one of the world's great millionaires. The tessellated stone floor was uncovered. The two rooms through which she led him contained only half a dozen men working at separate desks, and three or four stenographers. She knocked at an inner door and, without waiting for a reply, threw it open.

"Please come in."

They entered a comfortable but by no means luxuriously furnished apartment. Estelle closed the door, and sank into a chair a little breathlessly. Her father sat at a table upon which were several telephones, a banker's directory and a few other cloth-bound volumes. He looked up coldly at their entrance, without showing any particular sign of surprise or curiosity. Impossible though it must have been, it seemed to Mark almost as though he might have been expected.

"Olsen had left," the girl announced. "I must have missed him by five minutes. I found Mr. Van Stratton in the Mall. I don't know why I brought him, but I did. I have told him nothing."

Felix Dukane eyed the young man with a frown which was almost a scowl. Mark, who was already sufficiently confused was unable to indulge in even

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the faintest surmise as to the nature of the thoughts which were passing through the other's brain. He seemed to have become an object of speculative interest to the great financier but nothing in the latter's demeanour afforded the slightest indication as to the cause for such interest.

"Since the young man is here," Felix Dukane decided grudgingly, "we had better perhaps go upstairs and explain our dilemma."

He rose to his feet, unlocked the door of another exit from the room, by means of a key attached to his watch chain, and led the way across the hall to a small automatic lift into which he motioned his two companions to precede him. Mark, upon their upward journey, ventured upon a somewhat bewildered question, but the girl only shook her head. Her self-control seemed for the moment to have deserted her. Her lips were quivering, and there was an expression almost of horror in her eyes. More than ever Mark wondered how she had been able to drive with such success through the crowded streets. Presently the lift came to a standstill. They all stepped out into a little hall thickly carpeted and having an appearance of luxury which the downstairs premises had entirely lacked. With another key Mr. Dukane opened a heavy oak door, leading into an apartment which, from the number of books which lined the walls and the comfortable easy-chairs, might have been a man's library. The furniture, however, was in disorder, a couch was overturned, and a small table was lying on its side with a vase of flowers beside it from which the water was trickling across the carpet. Suddenly Mark received a shock. Upon

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the floor, behind one of the chairs, was the outstretched figure of a man, a rug covering the upper part of the body.

"Good God, what's happened here?" Mark cried.

"I have had the misfortune," Dukane explained in his hard dry tone, "during a somewhat heated altercation, to kill an importunate and annoying visitor."

Book One

Chapter IV

THERE was a brief period of horrified silence—the girl leaning against the side of an easy-chair with her head turned away, clearly on the point of a breakdown, Felix Dukane standing like a statue with his under lip thrust out, Mark, dumb as much from sheer surprise at this unexpected termination of his little adventure as from any sense of shock. But only a few feet away, lay without a doubt damning evidence as to the truth of Felix Dukane's confession. Mark found himself dwelling curiously upon unimportant details; the neat patent shoes, the monogrammed socks, the carefully pressed trousers of the prostrate figure. He roused himself at last to speech.

"Look here," he expostulated, "you're not serious? You may have hurt him. He can't be dead."

"I tell you that he is dead," Dukane insisted harshly. "I did not mean to strike so hard, but he had made me very angry. I struck him on the side

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of the head behind the ear, and he went down like a log. It is the second time he has tried to blackmail me. This time I lost my temper."

"But what are you going to do about it?" Mark ventured. "Have you rung up for a doctor, or for the police?"

Dukane scowled contemptuously.

"What would be the good of that?" he demanded. "The doctor could tell me no more than I know—that the man is dead. As for the police they are the last people to be dragged in. Do you suppose I want to be marched off to the Courts, and charged with manslaughter or murder?"

"Is there any other way?" Mark asked bluntly.

"Of course there is," was the angry rejoinder. "If the person whom my daughter went to fetch had not by some evil chance left for Paris this afternoon, he would have done everything that is necessary. The question is, are you man enough to take his place?"

"What do you mean?"

Dukane suddenly gripped his arm and Mark realised the other's enormous muscular strength. The fingers seemed to crumple up the flesh and almost crush the bone beneath. He turned him towards the window.

"Look there," he pointed out hoarsely. "You see what's coming?"

Mark glanced towards the river. Already the lamps across the bridge were shining dimly through a bank of yellow-black fog. Patches of it hung over the water, and even in this narrow thoroughfare the opposite houses were barely visible. Dukane pointed upwards. Above the roofs it hung like a descending curtain, solid and fearsome.

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"In half an hour," the latter continued, "no man in the streets will see another. Think! You drive a little way in the car below—where you will. You take—it—with you—anywhere, away from here. Who is to know? You look strong. You could lift a thing like that with one hand. What about the bridge, the river?"

"Say, is this a serious suggestion?" Mark gasped.

"Of course it is. Do you think I want to go into the dock and be charged with killing a creature like that. They might not punish me. The man is scum, I tell you, but I am in the midst of negotiations upon which the future prosperity of Europe may depend. If I am interrupted now it may mean ruin to thousands. I tell you that it is the work of my life, which draws near to the end," he went on, his voice suddenly strident. "Every hour of my time is pledged. Besides, my name! The thing might not be properly understood. There are risks I can't speak of."

Involuntarily Mark turned his head, and as he did so the girl came towards him. All that wonderful light, the expression which had played like some inner sunshine around her lips and eyes, had gone. The life was drained from her. There remained still, however, the nameless unanalysable appeal which seemed to have drifted to him from the moment of her entrance across the crowded restaurant.

"Of course this must all sound like madness," she said, "but help us—oh, help us, if you can."

"I should very much like to," he assured her gravely.

"A scandal just now would mean such terrible things for my father," she went on, "and it would

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do no good. The man is dead and there is an end of it. You will not run a great risk. If you are discovered you can say that you were on your way to a hospital, and we will tell the truth. But you will not be discovered. You will save us from a great disaster, and you will do nobody any harm. . . . It is so much to ask of a stranger, and yet, when I saw you in Pall Mall just now I remembered what you said to me an hour or two ago. I remembered——”

The pause was unaccountably eloquent, thrilling in a mysterious, unexpected way. She was offering nothing, promising nothing, and yet he felt an overmastering impulse to do her bidding, to run any risk, to establish himself in her life—her benefactor, the man who had not failed her in this terrible moment.

“If you are Mark Van Stratton,” her father intervened, “I cannot bribe you. You must have all the money you need in life, but if there is any other way——”

“You cannot bribe him, father,” she interrupted. “He is going to do this for us, for my sake. Will you render me this great service and become my friend for always, Mr. Mark Van Stratton? I have faults—many—but no one in the world has ever called me ungrateful.”

Her hand had slipped from his shoulder and her soft, caressing fingers lay upon his. Her eyes now had lost the glaze of horror. They had opened. They were full of appeal. They pleaded and promised at the same time. Mark had no more thought of hesitation.

“I shall do what you ask me,” he declared, taking her other hand for a moment into his. “Only not

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in the river. That seems too horrible. I will find a safe, quiet place somewhere."

"You will never regret it," she whispered.

"I am to take your car?"

"Why not? You say that you can drive it, and it will save time. There are piles of rugs and the seats are very low. Even when you drive you seem to be lying down."

"And from here to the street?"

"The lift we came up in is a private one," Dukane explained. "No one else is allowed to use it. These few rooms are my haven of escape from people whom I do not wish to see. The commissioner outside I have sent away. All you have to do is to carry him down, cover him up in the car, and drive off. You will be perfectly safe. Look outside."

Mark glanced through the dripping windows. The atmosphere was becoming denser, the street lamps diffuse patches of sickly yellow. There were shouts in the street, and the roar of the traffic had subsided into a rumble, almost a silence. Even inside the room little tongues of fog seemed to have found their way.

"What I am asking you to do," Dukane repeated, "is not only for my sake. It is for the sake of millions of others. My work cannot be stopped."

"I will do it," Mark promised. "The sooner I start the better. If the fog becomes worse I may not be able to drive the car at all. Is there petrol?"

"Full up," the girl answered.

"What shall I do with the car afterwards?"

"Leave it in any garage you like," she begged. "I can send for it."

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Within the room now the darkness was becoming every minute more dense. Mark stooped down and lifted the man from the floor; a slight frail creature he seemed. His complexion was fair, almost sandy, his features insipid, his mouth twisted as though in pain. There was a cruel wound at the back of the head with a few drops of blood. Nothing more. His weight to Mark was negligible. Dukane held open the door whilst the girl looked out. She crossed the passage, held her finger upon the knob and the lift came rumbling up.

"There is no one whom you could possibly meet," she whispered. "This part of the premises is completely cut off. Even my maid is at the hotel where we have rooms—not here."

He nodded and stepped into the lift carrying his burden, nerved for his task by her final glance of gratitude. Down below all was as Dukane had said; an empty passage, the car waiting at the kerb, its lights throwing strange little ineffective halos across the gathering wall of darkness. Mark laid the recumbent figure upon the seat, covering it to the throat with rugs, and climbed over the other side into the driver's place. Dukane, who had followed him down, stepped back coughing heavily.

"I have a private wire here, 1000 Y Gerrard, if it should be necessary to communicate with me," he confided.

"I'll remember," Mark promised.

"You will never regret this, Van Stratton," were Dukane's valedictory words.

"I hope not," the young man answered. . . .

And then the drive commenced which Mark remem-

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bered for the rest of his life. Choosing the side streets he crawled down on to the Embankment, up Northumberland Avenue, there to find a holocaust of motionless traffic, men shouting, women crying with fear, shadowy figures waving torches passing here and there, escorting a string of taxicabs and cars. Somehow or other he reached Pall Mall and crept up St. James's Street into Piccadilly, only to find things worse. He had finally set his mind against Dukane's first suggestion. The river was too terrible a thought. He would carry this thing through according to his own ideas. Slowly he felt his way down to West Kensington, and there a sudden slight uplifting of the fog enabled him to pass through Hammersmith and over Hammersmith Bridge at a reasonable speed. Round Ranelagh and Barnes, though, the darkness was almost impenetrable. Twice he was obliged to get out to locate with difficulty the kerb-stone. At the cross-roads by Roehampton Lane he turned to the right. Things were a little better here and in the course of time he reached the entrance of Richmond Park. To his immense relief the gates still stood open and, unobserved by anyone, he stole in, travelled on towards the Kingston Gate for about a mile, and then brought the car to a standstill by the side of the road. There was not a visible object anywhere and scarcely a sound, until a deer, attracted by the lights, came close up and then cantered off. Otherwise it seemed as though he had wandered into a new and strange world, peopled by an unimaginable silence. Mark was a young and strong man to whom nerves were a thing unknown, but for a moment, as he sat there, he shivered. The completion of his task seemed grotesque, like a hideous

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fragment of nightmare. The thing had to be faced however. He descended, stumbled round to the other side of the car, lifted out his burden, carried it a little way across the turf, and finally rested it with its back to a tree. When he stood away he was surprised to find that although the exertion had been slight enough there were drops of sweat standing out upon his forehead. He thrust his hand into his pocket, found his case and lit a cigarette, clambered round the car and opened the door. Then he stood suddenly still, for of all the horrors of the day the one he had now to face seemed to him the greatest and most incredible. From a few feet behind him, out of the darkness, came the sound of a feeble voice.

“Don't leave me here. Give me some brandy. Oh, God, my head!”

Book One

Chapter V

AFTER the first shock of finding his charge alive, Mark was conscious of an immense sense of relief. The drama of his ghastly drive was lightened. He realised the idiocy of having accepted the frantic story of a terrified man and girl as to what had happened, to have been satisfied without a doctor's verdict of the death of the man. Nevertheless, the first few seconds were extraordinarily thrilling. He stepped back to the tree and stood leaning down with his hand upon its trunk, looking at the recumbent figure. The

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commencement of the conversation naturally presented some difficulties.

"So you're not dead?" he ventured a little clumsily.

"I am one of those who take much killing," was the weary reply. "Who are you? A friend or an enemy? You mean to finish what he began? Why? I have not done you any harm."

"I am certainly not your enemy, or any man's that I know of," Mark assured him. "You are perfectly safe with me. If you can lift your arms, put them round my neck, and I will carry you back to the car."

The man obeyed feebly, and Mark made him as comfortable as he could amongst the cushions. He was still ghastly pale, and the wound on his head had recommenced to bleed slightly. Mark tied it up with his handkerchief.

"We'll stop at the first pub," he promised, "and I'll get you some brandy."

"And—afterwards?"

"I'm damned if I know. Where do you live? Where do you want to be taken?"

There was no reply. The man had closed his eyes again and appeared to be only partially conscious. Mark drove slowly back through the Park and out into the streets until he came to the lights of a public house. The man drank the brandy which he procured, drowsily, a few drops at a time.

"Soon I shall be all right," he murmured. "God! My head!"

They made their laboured way back through Hammersmith and Kensington. After they reached Hyde Park the fog was less dense, and progress

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comparatively easy. Mark pulled up by the side of the road.

"Look here," he suggested, "shall I take you to a hospital?"

His companion shook his head.

"Home then? Tell me your name and where you are staying?"

There was still no reply. The man seemed to have relapsed again into a comatose state. Mark glanced thoughtfully across towards the Hospital and remembered the questions he would probably have to answer. He started the car again, drove on to Curzon Street, and pulled up before the door of his own little maisonnette.

"Andrews," he told his servant, who admitted him, "I have a gentleman in the car who has met with an accident in the fog. Help me in with him. We'll get him upstairs and then telephone for a doctor."

It all seemed perfectly natural. Within a few minutes the injured man was comfortably in bed, and shortly afterwards, in response to the telephone call, the doctor made his appearance.

"I picked this poor fellow up in the street," Mark explained. "I fancy he had been having a row with someone."

The doctor nodded.

"Any quantity of accidents a day like this," he remarked beginning his examination. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"A complete stranger," Mark admitted. "I suppose I ought to have taken him to a hospital."

"Good thing you didn't. They're all chock full. He's had a terrible knock here."

"Serious?"

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"He'll be all right in time. Touch and go, though. Better let me send in a nurse, if you don't mind, to dress this. She'll take all the responsibility."

"Fine," Mark exclaimed. "And, doctor."

"Well?"

"There's no need for me to make any report, is there, about having found him? If he has any complaint to lodge against anyone he can make it himself when he recovers."

"No need for you to do anything of the sort," was the prompt reply. "So far as I'm concerned an accident in the fog is all I want to know. You weren't the aggressor, I suppose?"

"I can assure you that I wasn't," Mark declared. "I couldn't hit anything that size."

The doctor paused to write out a prescription.

"I'll send a nurse in half an hour," he promised, "and I'll be round in the morning. Don't bother about the fee now. I'm busy. There'll be plenty of time for that. He'll do nicely. I shouldn't be surprised if he slept."

The doctor took his leave and Mark, having rung for a servant to sit with the unconscious man, made his way downstairs into his own little library and threw himself into an easy chair. Presently Andrews entered noiselessly, carrying a tray upon which were glasses and a cocktail shaker.

"A good strong Martini," his master ordered. "Tell me, what time is it?"

"Half-past six, sir. You'll excuse my reminding you that you're dining at the American Embassy. One of the secretaries rang up about an hour ago to ask you to be there punctually. . . ."

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Mark drank his cocktail and took off the telephone receiver from the instrument by his side.

"1000 Y Gerrard," he demanded.

A strange voice answered the call.

"Van Stratton speaking," Mark announced. "Are Mr. or Miss Dukane there?"

"Mr. and Miss Dukane have both left."

"Where are they? Where can I find them?"

"We have no information."

"But the matter is important," Mark ventured.

"We have no information as to the whereabouts of either Mr. or Miss Dukane when they are not here."

"But I have information of the utmost importance for Mr. Dukane. You must tell me where to get at him," Mark persisted.

"Mr. Dukane has a private wire for his own use during the occasional hour or so a day which he spends here," was the uncompromising reply. "Apart from that his instructions are absolutely final. He is very much engaged and troubled with too much correspondence. He does not allow messages or his address to be given. Please ring off."

Mark abandoned his effort and lit a cigarette. Dorchester was announced. The latter flung himself into an easy chair with the air of one thoroughly at home.

"Your cocktails are better than anyone's, Mark," he confided. "I couldn't help coming round, even in this beastly fog. What did you think of our new friends at close quarters?"

"Well," Mark answered, "he seems just as disagreeable as he appears and she just as charming."

Dorchester stretched out his hand and took a cigarette.

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"The fellow's a big pot, you know."

Mark nodded. He was more in the humour for listening than talking.

"Tell you something I heard about him this afternoon," Dorchester went on. "Mind you, I don't know whether it's true or not. They say that he's been rather shy of the big things lately, gathering in his money from every quarter of the world. Do you know why?"

"Haven't the least idea," Mark acknowledged.

"They say," Dorchester continued impressively, "that he's at the bottom of all this speculation against the franc. That's the gossip in Paris, anyway."

Mark was thoughtful for a moment.

"I don't see that there's money to be made out of that," he commented.

"That's because you're not a financier," Dorchester declared. "Of course we don't know what his scheme is, but we do know that we have to be buying currency all the time to pay America, and a low franc suits us all right. I can't imagine Dukane standing in with our fellows though."

"Dukane doesn't cut any figure in international politics, does he?" Mark enquired.

"I don't imagine so," Dorchester answered. "I should think he's simply out for an enormous coup. They say that even the first of the Rothschilds never had a brain for finance like his. . . . What about a round of golf to-morrow morning, if the fog lifts?"

Mark shook his head.

"I guess I'm through with that for a bit. Do I strike you as having the necessary qualifications for a diplomat, Henry?"

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"No one on God's earth less so," was the fervent reply.

"No need to be rude about it," Mark complained. "Anyway, I'm roped in for the job. They are overworked at the Embassy and I'm going to do the social stunt and any other odd piece of work that turns up. Start to-morrow. Room of my own, official air, lady secretary, edited visiting lists, shake hands with everybody. You know the sort of thing!"

"Keep you out of mischief, anyway."

"You needn't be so beastly superior about it all. I was in the Service before the War began. I shall never forget the seven months I spent at a wretched little place in South America. By-the-bye, have you any idea where the Dukane's are staying?"

"Neither I nor anyone else, I should think," Dorchester replied gloomily. "Not only his business transactions, but his whole private life seems to be one huge camouflage. I wanted to have my people call, but it doesn't seem possible. I believe they move from hotel to hotel every day. What are you doing to-night?"

"Dining at the Embassy," Mark answered. "I've got to be there to have a talk with Mrs. Widdowes first, too."

Dorchester finished his cocktail and rose to his feet.

"I shall be down at the House until late," he announced. "What's the hospital nurse doing on your stairs?"

"One of the maids has influenza," Mark answered coolly, as he rang the bell. "I think I was rather an ass to take on a house. Service flats save you a lot of trouble. Sure you won't have another cocktail?"

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Dorchester shook his head.

"Must keep my brain clear," he confided. "The British public needs guiding and something tells me that to-night mine is the voice which will do it."

"You can't monopolise the House," Mark warned him, as they strolled into the hall. "You spoke a few nights ago."

"The voice of young England——" Dorchester began—"I say, what the devil's that?"

A door upstairs had been opened and the sound of a deep troubled groan travelled out from the room behind.

"My invalid, I suppose," Mark answered.

Dorchester stared at him for a moment incredulously, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Not my business, anyway," he remarked, as he took his leave. "Pretty deep bass voice that, though, for an invalid maidservant."

Book One

Chapter VI

MRS. WIDDOWES possessed most of the qualities desirable in the wife of a popular Ambassador, combined with a singular and entirely individual charm. She was inclined to be fussy about details, however, and Mark was not sorry when his half-an-hour's conversation with her before dinner was at an end.

"What about to-night's party?" he enquired.

"Quite informal," she answered. "There are only

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three interesting people. One is Baron Machiowinski, the Polish banker. He came to see us several times in New York."

"I have heard of him," Mark acknowledged. "They say that he lost everything during the War, and has made another fortune since."

Mrs. Widdowes indulged in a significant grimace.

"I know very little about any of these people," she confessed, "and though I suppose it's silly nowadays, I'm not very fond of entertaining foreigners all the time. The really interesting people who are coming to-night, however, are Felix Dukane and his daughter."

"Felix Dukane and his daughter—dining here to-night!" Mark repeated breathlessly.

"They are coming quite informally," Mrs. Widdowes confided. "We haven't even exchanged calls or anything. George has been asked from home to try to get some information from Mr. Dukane and thought the simplest way was to invite him to dine."

"Shall I be seated anywhere near the daughter?" Mark enquired.

Mrs. Widdowes glanced at the list which lay upon the table.

"Opposite. We are so small a party that we have only one married woman, so Miss Dukane has to sit on George's left. You don't know her by any chance, do you?"

"I met her at luncheon-time."

"I have never even seen her," Mrs. Widdowes admitted. "Is she attractive?"

"I should say so!" Mark replied, with restrained, but obvious enthusiasm.

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Mrs. Widdowes glanced once more at the list.

“Sorry I can’t put you on her other side, Mark,” she observed. “It doesn’t work out, though. It is one of the penalties of being something like an inmate of the household, as you will discover, that you have sometimes to make yourself agreeable to the dull people. However, you’ll have a chance to talk to her afterwards. We must go down now. . . .”

In the drawing-room, Mark, as he talked on unimportant matters with Brownlow, was conscious of a sense of excited anticipation which almost bewildered him. His mind was filled once more with vivid impressions of the girl who had taken so unexpectedly a wonderful place in his life and thoughts. He pictured her as he had seen her for the first time, entering the restaurant, and recalled the curious thrill which had struck a new note amongst his emotions, which had kept him almost spell-bound during their brief interview. Then he remembered the mute tenseness of her expression as she had turned round from the low driving seat of her automobile in the Mall, and half invited, half ordered him to take his place by her side; and afterwards the breathless seconds in that strange sitting-room, with the fog growing denser outside and the sense of tragedy within. To-night, in a few months—any moment—he would see her under entirely different conditions. He found his mind dwelling with singular persistence upon trifles—what coloured dress she would wear, how she would arrange her hair. Yet when she at last came into the room, followed by her father, he noticed none of these things. He knew later that she was wearing black, that her pearls were marvellous,

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that her hair lent itself naturally to the mode of the day. In those first few seconds of her coming, however, he could only realise with poignant disappointment that the very gracious smile with which she greeted the other people presented to her faded almost entirely from her lips as their eyes met.

"Mr. Van Stratton, you know, I believe," her hostess concluded.

"We met at luncheon to-day, didn't we?" was the indifferent assent.

Mark murmured something conventional, and immediately afterwards dinner was announced. He took in Myra, the somewhat youthful daughter of the house, who had been his protégée since childhood, and did his best to listen to her rather voluble chatter. All the time he was puzzled, even distressed. The fascinating little smile which in conversation so seldom left Estelle's lips, was absent if by chance she looked across the table. Her eyes met his once, and remained unmagnetic and aloof. Once he ventured to address her, but her reply was monosyllabic. A few places from him Felix Dukane sat by his hostess's side, taciturn, almost morose, as he talked in a somewhat stilted fashion of subjects which he obviously found uninteresting. One of the other guests, conveniently placed for intercourse with him, was a great English banker with an historic name, but all his attempts to discuss even indirectly the great problems of finance were absolutely unsuccessful. Dukane was living up to his reputation; a hard, impenetrable person, without the desire or the capacity for social amenities. He was everything that might have been expected, perhaps, but the more Mark considered his daughter's manner,

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the more puzzled he became. At least, she might have vouchsafed him one little kindly glance of understanding, even if she preferred to ignore everything else. On the contrary, when the women left the room she avoided his eyes with a persistence which sent him back to his place disheartened and depressed.

The after-dinner interval was fortunately short. Felix Dukane drank no wine and refused to smoke. In a few minutes his host rose to his feet.

"Mr. Dukane and I are going into the study," he announced. "You will perhaps join us, Baron, and you, Mark, if you like, can come along, too. You want to be off, I know, Brownlow. Mark can do anything necessary."

"If you wouldn't mind excusing me, sir," Brownlow assented. "Mrs. Widdowes was anxious that I should take Myra on to the dance at Apley House."

Crossing the hall, Mark did his best to detach Dukane for a moment from the others, but absolutely failed. There seemed to be some understanding between father and daughter to utterly ignore the happening of the afternoon. Mark relapsed into gloomy and silent resentment. At his Chief's request he passed round the cigarettes and cigars which were set out upon the sideboard and, helping himself to a liqueur brandy, took a seat at a writing-table in the background, in case he should be required.

Mr. Widdowes, with a facility which amounted almost to genius, threw off the mantle of the ambassador and became a private American citizen, as he stretched himself out in his easy-chair and puffed contentedly at his cigar.

"It's very good of you to have come along this

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evening, Mr. Dukane," he said. "I couldn't help thinking that a few minutes' friendly chat between us at the present juncture of affairs might save a whole lot of misunderstanding in the future."

There was no response in Dukane's manner to the geniality of his host. He had refused an easy-chair, and was seated without any measure of relaxation at the table in the middle of the room. He had declined both cigars and liqueurs, and his coffee remained as yet untasted.

"I could scarcely refuse a conference with the representative of a Country which numbers amongst its citizens so many of my friends and competitors," he commented dryly.

Mr. Widdowes frowned.

"But my dear Mr. Dukane," he pointed out, "I want to make it quite clear to you—I hoped that my little invitation had already done so—that, for the purposes of our conversation, I am entirely an unofficial person. I have no Government instructions of any sort. I simply wanted a friendly chat as regards certain of your activities in Drome."

"You wish to speak to me, I take it, then, unofficially," Felix Dukane observed. "Why?"

"Don't you see," the Ambassador explained, "that a frank and friendly conversation may clear away certain misunderstandings which if they were allowed to develop might necessitate official action?"

Dukane almost smiled; at any rate, his lips parted, although any impression of humour was entirely lacking.

"What official action," he enquired, "could you ever take with regard to me? I am a private

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individual. I doubt whether anyone knows for certain of what Country I am a citizen. The Government—especially the Government of a great Country like the United States of America—can scarcely make use of the weapons of international diplomacy against an individual.”

“The situation is unique, I grant you,” Mr. Widowes assented, good-humouredly, “but you must remember that you are a very exceptional individual, Mr. Dukane. You appear to have set yourself to acquire the whole of the assets of a Country where considerable American interests exist. One hears of millions of acres of fertile country, of mines, and a whole province of oil producing land, passing into your possession. A dozen times within the last few months, American citizens have been denied an option on various territories in this Country. The strongest representations to the court of Andropulo, by our representative there have failed to evoke anything but evasive replies. What does it all mean, Mr. Dukane? Are you aiming at taking your place amongst the royalties or dictators of Europe, by right of purchase? If so, you’ll have to set up a court, you know, and invite foreign representatives. Other people have an interest in Drome. You can’t treat a whole kingdom like a country estate.”

“Isn’t my money,” Felix Dukane enquired, “as good as the money of these American citizens you speak of? Why shouldn’t the Government of Drome—if they prefer it—do business with me instead of with your Country people. I don’t buy on behalf of your competitors, I don’t buy to increase the wealth of any other European Country. I buy for my own hand,

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and I buy where and what I choose. If the mines of Drome are in the market, and please me, I buy. If her wheat lands seem to me a good investment, I buy. Is your Country going to war with me because I get ahead of her citizens ? ”

The Ambassador, still unruffled, knocked the ash from his cigar. Dukane rose to his feet.

“ Mr. Widdowes,” he went on, “ I came here at your invitation, and I listened to what you had to say. I need no information from Machiowinski. I may not possess an army or a navy or an air force, but I have my own secret service. I could tell you of that meeting of bankers in New York who sent a representative to Washington, which resulted in this—unofficial—invitation of yours. I could tell Machiowinski a few things about the visit of certain American exploiters to his capital, and their influence upon his presence here. I will content myself by saying that I do not work in the dark because I work alone in life. It is my glory and my pride to do so. Such success as I achieve, I achieve alone. If ever I fall—and I feel indeed, a Daniel,” he concluded, with that ghost of a smile, “ when I think of the Goliath you, Mr. Widdowes, unofficially represent—I fall alone. . . . May I be permitted to pay my respects to Mrs. Widdowes ? I am an early man, and I am convinced that any further discussion on this subject would be futile.”

Mr. Widdowes rose at once to his feet, and accompanied his guest courteously towards the door.

“ I am sorry I can't make any impression upon you, Mr. Dukane,” he regretted. “ I am not talking about Washington, but our people on the other side as a whole would have much appreciated a plain statement

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from you as regards your intentions. You have the right, of course, to keep your own counsel."

"As you do yours when it suits you," was the somewhat gruff rejoinder. . . .

The drawing-room was unexpectedly empty when the three men reached it. Mrs. Widdowes looked up from her writing-desk.

"Your daughter has gone on to the ball at Apley House with Myra and Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Dukane," she announced. "I was to tell you that she would only stay an hour, and Mr. Brownlow will see her to your hotel."

Felix Dukane received the news without any sign of interest. Mark frowned gloomily. His hostess smiled at him.

"Why don't you go on there for an hour, Mark?" she suggested. "You're an official member of the household now, and we're all invited if by any chance you didn't have a card of your own."

"Why, I'd like to," Mark assented eagerly, "if you're sure it would be all right."

There was a brief interchange of farewells. Afterwards Mark followed Dukane out into the hall, waited whilst he took his overcoat and hat from a servant and stood upon the steps with him.

"I have something to tell you, sir," he confided, under his breath. "Will you drop me at Apley House? It's only a short distance."

"You didn't fail, I hope?" Dukane asked anxiously

"It wasn't that," Mark replied, his voice a little unsteady with the import of the news so long repressed. "The fellow wasn't dead."

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If the announcement was any relief to Felix Dukane he certainly showed no signs of it. He stood for a moment perfectly still, drawing on his gloves and frowning gloomily. Then he motioned his companion to enter the car which had just drawn up.

"When did you find that out?" he demanded.

"Just as I was leaving him," Mark explained. "I got him out to Richmond Park all right, propped him up against a tree in a lonely place, and was just starting in my car to drive away when he called after me."

"You had to go back, of course?" Dukane enquired bitterly.

"Why sure!" Mark answered. "I couldn't leave him there to die."

"Rubbish!" Dukane scoffed. "I told you what sort of a creature he was. What did you do with him then?"

"Well, I thought of a hospital," Mark confided, "but then I realised that there might be too many questions asked, so I took him back to my house. He has a doctor and a nurse, and is being well looked after there. They seem to think that he will be all right in a week or so. I'd have told you all this before, but I couldn't get a word either with you or your daughter. I telephoned from Curzon Street, but your people would give me no information as to your whereabouts."

Felix Dukane scowled out into the darkness. He had the air of a man confronted with an ugly problem.

"My hand weakens with the years," he muttered. "If I had the chance again I would strike harder."

Mark felt a sudden impulse of revulsion against his companion. He had expected relief, and found nothing but a ferocious disappointment.

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"Is there anything more you wish me to do in the matter?" he asked, as the car stopped before the great porticoed front of Apley House.

"Keep him where he is if you can, until I have made up my mind," Dukane enjoined. "If you could prevent his communicating with anyone so much the better."

"I'll do my best," Mark assented, a little dubiously, "but it's difficult in one's own house, and the man is still very ill."

"Difficult!" Felix Dukane repeated angrily. "You don't know what this means, what that man stands for. He is a venomous creature, a professional spy and blackmailer, but if he chooses, if he says the right word to the right person, he can set all Europe ablaze. Where is your house?"

"20b, Curzon Street," Mark replied.

Dukane nodded and turned away. Mark felt himself dismissed, and stepped out of the limousine, the door of which a footman was holding open. A moment or two later he was ascending the broad stairs of Apley House.

MARK spent a disconcerting and profitless hour watching Estelle Dukane dance and avoiding so far as possible his own obvious duty to his acquaintances that he might be free to claim her if ever the chance

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arose. At the end of that time, however, despairing of a better opportunity, he took his courage into his hands, and boldly approached her as she sat with her most recent partner in one of the ante-rooms.

"May I have this dance?" he begged.

Even whilst she was apparently hesitating, the music struck up, and he took her firmly away. As soon as they were safely in the crowd he whispered in her ear.

"I have some news for you. I have told your father. You must spare me a minute after this dance."

She looked up at him with a queer disturbance in her eyes. He had an idea that she, like her father, found something sinister in his avowal.

"You did not succeed?" she exclaimed. "You have bungled that affair, perhaps?"

"So your father seemed to think," he replied, a little bitterly. "I should have thought my news would have been good."

"Well?"

He waited for a moment, until they were outside the throng.

"The man is alive," he confided. "He will probably live."

"Alive!" she repeated incredulously.

"He is at my house in Curzon Street now. He has a hospital nurse with him, and the doctor says he will recover."

She seemed suddenly tired.

"Let us sit down," she suggested. "You dance very nicely, but this has upset me."

They found some chairs in a retired corner, and she accepted a glass of champagne from a footman who was passing.

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"Of course, in a way I am glad," she confessed, "and yet—well, it makes complications. What are you going to do with him?"

"What can I do?" he asked. "I shall keep him until he is well. Then he is free to go wherever he wishes. So far as I can tell he does not seem vindictive. He has said nothing to the doctor about how he received his hurt, and I have explained that I picked him up in the fog. He has not contradicted me."

"No, I do not suppose he will tell," she reflected. "That is not the danger."

"Is he really what your father called him—a blackmailer?"

"One of the worst type," she answered. "And the trouble is that he has brains. He has accomplished a wonderful piece of work. I do not wish to talk of him any more for the present, I am anxious to hear what my father has to say."

There was a moment's pause.

"Do you care to dance again?" he ventured.

"Presently, perhaps, I am a little upset. Go on talking about anything."

"How is it that it is so difficult to see anything of you?" he asked. "Have you no house, no friends here?"

"Very few," she admitted. "London has never attracted me. We spend most of our time, when we are not travelling, in Paris."

"How do you amuse yourself? How do you pass the time here?" he enquired. "You don't play games I am sure. You must do something."

"Have you not guessed?" she replied. "I am my father's confidante in everything he undertakes."

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He never plans an enterprise without talking it over with me."

"It seems a curious life for a girl like you," he observed. "To watch you as you have been this evening, talking to all these men, and dancing, one would never imagine that you cared for anything more serious in life."

"I have my moments of frivolity," she answered. "The worst of it is that I never know when they will arrive."

"To-night, for instance?" he suggested.

"I came on here," she confided, "only because I wished to meet a friend who has arrived in London. Lord Dorchester is trying to find him for me. If he succeeds you must go away at once, please."

"Who is he?" Mark asked irritably.

"Prince Andropulo of Drome. I want to talk to him."

"Well, I hope Dorchester doesn't find him then," Mark declared, "because I want to talk to you myself."

"What about?" she asked. "You are not interested in high finance, are you?"

"Is Prince Andropulo?" he rejoined.

She smiled.

"Perhaps not directly," she admitted, "but he will be king before long of an undeveloped country. My father thinks that with capital Drome has a great future."

"I am not interested in Drome," Mark confessed, "and even if I were there are other things I would rather talk to you about."

"As for instance?"

"Yourself."

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She had relaxed a little and was leaning back in her chair. The air of aloofness which all the evening had hurt and puzzled him had gone for the moment, and her eyes were watching him quizzically. Her smile mocked him.

"What interest can you have in me?" she demanded. "I have scarcely known you more than a few hours."

"I have this interest," he replied: "that some day I am hoping to marry you."

She laughed; gaily this time, and without reserve.

"Delightful!" she murmured. "Now you are beginning to amuse me. I love this Anglo-Saxon candour. Would you be considered just a trifle premature, I wonder?"

"I am not making you a proposal," he reminded her, "unless you feel disposed to give me a little more encouragement. I am simply warning you that some day I shall. I felt it directly you came into the restaurant at the Ritz. I even ventured to say something of the sort."

"To Lord Dorchester and Colonel de Fontanay?"

"Yes."

"You took rather a liberty, did you not?"

He shook his head.

"I don't think so. As a matter of fact, Henry Dorchester has pronounced himself my rival."

"A nice boy!" she murmured. "I have been dancing with him. He is not like you, though. He does not waste his time playing games. Even to-night he has been at work down in the House."

"I, too," Mark announced, "am a working man."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning. Not half an hour after I

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left you, Mr. Widdowes asked me if I could come into the Embassy for a time. They are overworked there, and Dimsdale, one of the secretaries, has crocked up. I thought of your advice, and I didn't hesitate. All the same it was rather a coincidence, wasn't it ? ”

“ I suppose so,” she admitted. “ Are you going to work at the Embassy itself or are you going abroad for them ? ”

“ I shall do whatever I am told,” he answered. “ So far my first job has been to go through a list of American tourists and discover who can be invited to a mere ‘ At Home,’ who must be invited to lunch and who to dinner.”

“ It doesn't sound exciting,” she laughed.

“ Before you are snatched away from me, there is something I want to ask you,” he begged, changing the subject abruptly. “ I have been thinking about it all day. Was your advice to me altogether a coincidence ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Well, you spoke to me of what you call my idleness. You begged me if any work were offered to take it. Within an hour's time that work was offered. Had you any idea that such a thing was about to happen ? ”

“ How could I have ? ” she rejoined. “ I am a complete stranger to the Widdowes. We dined there to-night only because Mr. Widdowes wished to have an informal talk with my father.”

“ But I still ask you whether you had any idea ? ” he persisted, dimly apprehending a certain evasiveness in her manner.

She shook her head.

“ You must not ask me silly questions. Be content

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with knowing that I much prefer you as you are. I like men who are workers: Many of the rich idlers of your sex who do nothing but hunt and shoot and play polo are picturesque enough, but they are not my type. . . . Now, shall I give you one more word of advice."

"Do."

"If you have the choice, drop this social work. It is not of very great consequence, is it, and you look so steady and responsible that I'm sure before long they would trust you with more important matters."

"I certainly will if I can," he promised. "I think Dimsdale used to do some of the Chief's private correspondence when they were busy. I may have a chance of taking his place."

"If that is offered, accept it," she begged earnestly. "Ah, here comes the person I want to see, at last!"

She looked across the room towards a sallow-faced man, young apparently, with black hair brushed smoothly back, dark eyes, and a very bored manner. There was nothing in his dress to offend the *convenances* but there seemed to be a sort of Orientalism about the size of his studs, the rings he wore on the little finger of each hand. He had the face of a young man in the early thirties, but the heavily-set figure of one ten years older."

"That is the Prince," she pointed out. "Get up at once, please. Go straight over to him, and tell him that Miss Dukane wishes to speak to him. Hurry, please, before anyone gets hold of him. And you had better stay away."

"Shan't I be allowed one more dance?" he pleaded. "And how are you getting home?"

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"Mr. Brownlow and Miss Widdowes have promised to drop me," she said. "You shall have another dance afterwards if it is possible, but do not interrupt me when I am talking to Prince Andropulo, unless I call you."

Mark performed his errand and watched from the background whilst the Prince, who had hurried eagerly to Estelle's side, bent low over her fingers and raised them to his lips. His dark eyes glittered. It was obvious that the meeting was of import to him. Mark turned away with a black look upon his face. Myra, who was dancing with Brownlow, suddenly beckoned to him.

"Alan," she begged, "go and find another partner, there's a dear. We've had four running, and a girl in her first season can't be too careful. Come and dance with me, Mark, and tell me why this scowl?"

They moved off to the music, after a good-humoured protest from the discarded young man.

"Well, I don't know, Myra," Mark confided. "I don't feel at my best to-night, and that's the truth. Am I getting too old, I wonder, for these big dances, where one knows so few people?"

"They aren't so much fun as the small ones," she admitted. "Tell me, what did you think of Miss Dukane to-night?"

"I found her very attractive," was his prompt confession.

"I think she is almost the prettiest girl I have ever seen," Myra decided, "and yet there is something about her face—what is it, I wonder?—which seems a little hard. I think it must be her mouth. One moment, she is smiling, and the next—well, those little

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lines looked to me as though they might be cruel. I am not at all sure that if I were a man I should care to be in love with her. Mark, shall I tell you a secret ? ”

“ Go right ahead, don’t tell me, though, that Alan Brownlow has proposed to you—forward brute ! ”

She laughed.

“ Nothing to do with me at all. It’s about you yourself. I don’t think it’s really a secret, or I wouldn’t dare tell you, and to-morrow you’ll know, anyway.”

“ I’m getting terribly curious.”

“ I’m telling you,” she went on, after a moment’s pause, “ because you look rather bored to-night, and it may interest you. I believe dad is going to offer you some much more important work with someone who is on his way over from America. Muminie is to have someone else go through her visiting lists.”

Mark was conscious of a curious little thrill. His eyes wandered away in search of Estelle.

“ Extraordinary ! ” he muttered.

“ Why extraordinary ? ” she asked. “ I think it’s very natural. I suppose it’s a sort of private secretaryship.”

“ I haven’t had much experience of that sort of thing,” Mark reflected dubiously.

“ I don’t think it’s very difficult. From what Ned used to say you don’t have much to do except wait about until your Chief is inclined to be eloquent, and then boil down the result to a typist. It must be rather thrilling, though, when there’s anything really going on.”

“ I think it’s fine ! ” he declared.

“ Don’t know anything about it to-morrow,” she enjoined.

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"I won't breathe a word," he promised. "You're a dear for telling me."

Alan Brownlow discovered them presently, and they lingered for a few minutes in the refreshment room. Afterwards, Mark strolled out and found Dorchester with de Fontanay. The three stood talking for a time, Mark especially watching, with gloomy eyes, Estelle, who was dancing with the Prince. Presently she passed them, apparently oblivious of their near presence, leaning back a little and laughing into her partner's face. Mark scowled openly. Dorchester frowned his disapproval. De Fontanay shook his head.

"Idiots, both of you!" he sighed. "You are already advanced a stage towards trouble. Can you not realise that there goes a woman who was born to break hearts?"

Book One

Chapter VIII

MARK was a little shocked at his guest's appearance when, in obedience to a somewhat urgent summons, he presented himself in the latter's room soon after ten o'clock on the following morning. The doctor had paid his visit, and departed, leaving a fairly favourable report. The nurse, too, as she prepared to take her temporary leave, was encouraging.

"The doctor thinks that there is no longer any fear of concussion," she confided, under her breath,

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as Mark held open the door for her. "He is very weak, though, and seems dazed at times, and afraid of unwelcome visitors. He likes to have the door locked."

Mark, after he had humoured the sick man's whim, and turned the key, took a seat by the bed.

"Better not talk too much," he advised his guest. "That was rather a nasty crack you had."

"Do you know my name?" the other asked abruptly.

"No idea. Perhaps you'd better tell it to me in case there are enquiries."

"Brennan—Max Brennan. Can you guess at my nationality?"

"I should have thought that you were English, or perhaps Colonial," Mark ventured.

"God knows what I am. You shall judge for yourself. My mother was a Russian, and my grandfather an Armenian. I have in my veins the blood of the Slav, the Teuton, and the decadent Asiatic."

"Then I congratulate you upon speaking English so perfectly. You have not even the trace of an accent."

"I had, but I have lost it. You see, I was one of those who practically made their homes in England before the War, for a purpose. That's all over. My Secret Service work now is done in other directions. I set myself a few years ago a great task, and in that task I have succeeded—a little too well to please Felix Dukane."

"Secret Service work nowadays seems a trifle out of date," Mark remarked doubtfully.

The sick man turned in his bed, and looked at his host fixedly.

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"Who and what are you?" he demanded. "An American?"

"My name is Van Stratton," Mark replied. "I am an American, as you say."

"I think," Brennan continued, "that the Atlantic must be the widest ocean in the universe. It seems to keep so many of you Americans in a state of not understanding. Can you not realise that there are other wars waged than those which are waged with the paraphernalia of destruction—wars underneath the surface of society, quite as devastating as any campaign that was ever launched, only with different weapons? Propaganda instead of cannon, bribery instead of poisoned gas. You understand?"

"I should have thought that you were exaggerating, but I understand," Mark admitted.

"I have fought in those secondary wars all my life," Brennan confided, a little wearily. "I ought to know, they wouldn't even let me into the army. I was too valuable. They called me 'The Little Ferret.' There wasn't much I couldn't find out if I set my mind to it."

"Are you sure you are not talking too much," Mark warned him.

"The doctor seems to think that you're getting on very nicely, but you had a nasty knock, you know."

"I'll come to the point, then," the other acquiesced, "although it is odd that my brain clears as I speak. What have you to do with Felix Dukane? How long have you known him?"

"A matter of twenty-four hours."

The man on the bed was plainly intrigued.

"You speak the truth?" he demanded.

"Why not? I was introduced to Mr. Dukane and

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his daughter after luncheon at the Ritz, yesterday. An hour or so later the young lady stopped her automobile in the Mall and invited me to enter. She brought me to Norfolk Street, told me that she and her father were in trouble, and begged for my help."

"This is interesting," Brennan murmured. "Go on."

"Dukane thought that he had killed you. The idea was that I should take your body and leave it in some remote place where it might appear that you had met with an accident during the fog."

"That is all your acquaintance with or knowledge of the Dukanes?" Brennan persisted almost incredulously.

"Absolutely."

He lay for a moment silent, with knitted brows.

"Can you explain them," he went on, "why they should have appealed to you for help of so extraordinary a character?"

Mark reflected for a moment. The man on the bed was beginning to interest him. He was evidently leading up to something. He decided to tell the truth.

"I think," he confided, "Miss Dukane realised that I admired her very much and that I was likely to do anything she asked."

The sick man considered his reply thoughtfully.

"Yes," he observed, "that is reasonable enough. Estelle Dukane has turned a great many heads—broken a great many hearts, one could say, if it weren't that such things are out of date. For your own sake, young man, I hope that you are not serious.

"Why do you hope that?" Mark demanded.

Brennan raised himself a little in the bed. His thin,

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shapely hands fell one upon the other as though to give weight to his words.

"Men and women," he confided, "I have studied all my life. In each woman I have found something good, in each—even the best of them—a little bad, but never before have I known a woman—a girl, for she is scarcely more than that—with a stone in place of a heart. In appearance she is the beautiful image of her beautiful mother, who, although she was of Grecian birth, was a Parisienne at heart. Inside, she is her father over again. You have done me a kindness, young man. I would be doing you a greater if you believed me. Her eyes may promise you the things you desire, her lips may even hint at them, she may have moments of curious kindness, but never for one second will her heart beat faster for any man, never will the thrills of romance, the really beautiful things of life, take their place in her brain, as with other women when love comes. She is a schemer of her father's type, body and soul."

The man spoke almost fervently, and, when he had finished, closed his eyes as though exhausted. Mark, dogged and unbelieving, nevertheless felt the chill of his words.

"Well," he muttered, "let that pass. Is there anything more you want to say to me?"

"Of course there is," was the almost impatient response, as Brennan raised himself once more in the bed. "I have sent for you because in this last great enterprise of mine I have played a lone hand, and there is no one else in this Country I could trust. I have to take a risk with someone. I am taking it with you."

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"Better get on with it then," Mark begged. "I have to leave here in a few minutes."

"The doctor speaks hopefully," Brennan continued, "but I know something of surgery and anatomy. There are two things I fear—loss of memory or a long period of unconsciousness. Lest either of these should come to me, I have something to say to you. Are you listening?"

"Naturally," Mark assured him.

"Yesterday, I gave Felix Dukane the surprise of his life. I told him of my successful enterprise. I told him of the amazing discovery I had made—a discovery which would shock all Europe and of the corresponding revelations which I was in a position to make. The fate of the world for the next twenty years depends not upon the League of Nations or the Peace Conference, or any of those old ladies' meetings, but upon me—Max Brennan."

Mark looked downwards at the man upon the bed a little doubtfully.

"Isn't that going rather far?" he ventured.

"It is the plain, unvarnished truth," Brennan insisted. "A dozen words from me, and the proof, mark you—the proof which I hold—and either the war cloud would once more roll over Europe or Felix Dukane would face black ruin. He knows it. He never even for a second doubted my word. When I sought my interview, I meant to sell to him, and the little group who are most interested, the information I have collected, for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. That was my price. They would have given it to me, I am sure, but in his anger, Dukane lost control of himself. I spoke a word he hates. He became for

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the moment a madman. He struck me with that loaded stick before I was prepared—and here I am.”

“With secret information worth a fortune still in your possession,” Mark observed, with the tolerant good nature of one humouring the sick.

“I said that I went to Dukane prepared to sell the result of my labours for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds,” the man on the bed declared feverishly. “It is worth countless millions. It is worth the future history of a nation. It concerns matters at which no one could guess. It reveals the most gigantic intrigue in all history—an intrigue at the nature of which no human being has ever guessed. If I die or lose my memory, I shall make you my heir. If I do not, for the present, I keep my secret.”

Mark looked at his companion with some anxiety. During the last few minutes, he had grown even paler, and his words were coming with more difficulty.

“See here,” he advised, “you had better quit talking now. I’ll come in again later on.”

Brennan rolled up one sleeve of the pyjamas he was wearing. Above his elbow was a plain, heavy band of iron in the form of a bracelet with a flat top. He touched a spring, and the latter rolled back. Inside was a key.

“This,” he confided, speaking now with almost unnatural restraint, “is the key of the Safe number 323, in the Chancery Lane Deposit Company. Kindly oblige me by taking possession of it. If I lose my memory or die, fetch my papers, read them, realise that I have told you the truth, and act as you will.”

There was a knock at the door. Mark unfastened it, and the nurse entered.

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"I think," she decided, with a glance towards the bed, "that our patient has perhaps talked long enough."

"Quite right," Mark agreed, as he prepared to leave the room.

The nurse bent over the invalid, felt his pulse and poured out a glass of medicine.

"I'm all right," the sick man murmured, with a sigh of relief. "To be tired is nothing, I have no longer the great fear."

Book One

Chapter IX

MARK, upon his arrival at Carlton House later in the morning found from the nature of the work awaiting him that Myra's anticipations were fully verified. In every respect it was of an entirely different character to his yesterday's start, and the state of absorption into which it threw him was a distinct relief after the poignant sensations of the last twenty-four hours. He had no longer to fight angrily against what seemed to him in his saner moments an absolute obsession, no longer to spend the time sorting out the memory of a few kind words and glances from amidst a tangled mass of indifference. All his life, women had spoilt him. He had every advantage in the world to offer, and he found the fact recognised. Now, for the first time, he was confronted with an entirely altered situation. Estelle Dukane's indifference was too natural to be altogether assumed. He had an uneasy conviction

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that he was not of her type, that his whole outlook upon life, his views and even his character, would have to be modified before she would find him in the least degree acceptable. In a few hours he had entirely lost his self-confidence, free always from any objectionable features, but a valuable aid to his dignified progress through life. He mistrusted himself, and even a brief period of forgetfulness was welcome. . . .

Towards the end of the morning, Mr. Widdowes came unexpectedly into the room where Mark was working, accompanied by a small, rather shrunken man, pallid, with smoothly-brushed grey hair, and keen eyes, imperfectly concealed behind gold-rimmed spectacles. His appearance, though by no means insignificant, gave little indication of the fact that here was one of the most brilliant brains of the Western world.

"Good morning, Mark," the Ambassador greeted him as the latter rose to his feet. "How's the work?"

"Quite all right, thank you, sir," was the prompt reply. "I don't think I've made an absolute hash of anything yet."

Mr. Widdowes turned to his companion.

"Mark," he continued, "I should like you to know Mr. Hugerson, who is over here from Washington upon an official mission."

"Glad to meet you, young man," Mr. Hugerson said, as Mark came forward with extended hand. "I used to know your father well. He wasn't quite such a giant as you, but he was a pretty useful half-back in my last year, and he developed a wonderful head for figures later on in life. Seems to me," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "I've heard of you more as a sportsman than a diplomat."

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"I'm afraid that may be so, sir," Mark admitted deprecatingly. "I was in the Service for a short time after I left Harvard though, and I am very glad to have made another start, even though it's rather late."

"Work's good for all of us," Mr. Hugerson pronounced. "I am sixty-three, and I have never stopped. I don't imagine really that the men of our nation have the instinct for leisure. You pick it up like a germ on this side though, if you stay over long enough."

"I don't mind work so long as it's worth while," Mark confided. "If Mr. Widdowes is able to make use of me, I'm perfectly happy here."

"Oh, we'll make use of you all right," his Chief promised, "if we only keep you as a chucker-out. We get shorter-handed every day. You know Rawlinson's laid up with the flu' now, I suppose?"

"I heard so this morning. That's too bad!"

"I'd offered him to Mr. Hugerson here, if he needed any help," Mr. Widdowes went on, "and help he certainly will need presently. How should you like to take his place?"

"Nothing I should like better, sir, if Mr. Hugerson is willing," Mark declared promptly. "I don't know exactly what sort of work it is, of course," he added, after a moment's hesitation.

Mr. Hugerson toyed for a minute with his under lip.

"Well, we'll talk about that later on," he said. "Most people have an idea of what my mission on this side is. I never was much of a diplomatist. Figures have been my joy and my hobby in life."

"The whole world knows that sir," Mark acknowledged.

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Mr. Hugerson smiled.

"Unromantic things I suppose they must appear to the uninitiated," he observed, "but where international finance is concerned—well, we'll talk about that later on. Jove, how I used to admire your father, Van Stratton. He had a wonderful head for figures, but in his younger days, he was a greater athlete than mathematician."

"You coaxed your boat yourself, sir, the year they beat Yale," Mark reminded him.

"Bully for you, my lad!" the other exclaimed. "George this lad's got the makings of an Ambassador in him after all. He remembers the right things."

"Come along and have luncheon, Mark," the Ambassador invited. . . .

Myra, next whom Mark found himself placed, was inclined to be admonitory.

"One dance the whole of last evening," she reminded him, "and I am your Chief's daughter! Do you call that diplomacy? You really ought to have devoted yourself altogether to me with a view of rapid promotion."

"One couldn't get near you," he grumbled.

"You should have arranged with me beforehand."

"But I didn't know that I was coming until the last minute," he reminded her. "It was your mother who suggested it. I hadn't an invitation of my own at all."

"You and Henry Dorchester were as bad as one another," she complained. "You both of you stood about and gazed at that little Dresden doll beauty, Estelle Dukane. Henry did his duty by me though. I wish he danced as well as you."

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"When do we have another opportunity?" Mark enquired.

"That will come soon enough. The only worry is whether you'll be able to keep your eyes off that amazing young woman, and devote yourself a little more to me. Mother," she went on, "have you heard the awful thing that's happened to Mark. For the first time in his young life I believe that he has lost his heart."

"To you, I hope, dear," her mother remarked pleasantly. "I think you'd make an admirable son-in-law, Mark."

"I'm always hoping," he confessed, "but you can't marry into the nursery. Grow up a little, Myra dear, and learn to take life seriously."

"That's all because I discovered his secret," she laughed. "Never mind! I should make you a much better wife, and it seems to me that she's got what I call a bizarre taste in men. When we wanted to bring her home she went off with that Eastern prince—after dancing with him half the evening too."

Mark felt a ridiculous sinking of the heart. The question he had been longing to ask was miserably answered.

"I wondered what had become of you all," he admitted. "I danced once with Edna Worthington. Then she wanted a sandwich or something, and when we got back you'd all disappeared."

"How you must have cursed the girl who wanted a sandwich or something at the wrong time!" Myra exclaimed. "I don't believe you enjoyed yourself a bit last night."

"Is she allowed to come down to all her meals?" Mark asked his hostess.

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regretfully. "You're not missing anything, my friend—not in the way of grace of manner or personality, or conversation—there's no doubt about the man's financial genius. Other men can talk money. He can produce it. Of course, we know what he's up to now more or less, but he wants to be on the safe side according to any move Washington may make. That's why he's all the time fencing with me. Fortunately there's a clear line. So much may he know and no more."

"The day after I complete my investigations," Mr. Hugerson declared, "I insist upon meeting the man."

"You shall," the Ambassador promised. "You shall also meet the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life—his daughter."

Myra sighed.

"A pity about father," she whispered to her neighbour. "Since he met mother and I did him the honour to become his daughter, he seems to have lost his taste. Do you think she is the prettiest girl you ever saw in your life, Mark? Look well at me before you answer."

"I'm afraid I do," he admitted.

Myra stretched across the table for a chocolate and sighed once more.

"After this," she murmured, "it is either back to the nursery for me or a nunnery. Unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I can convert either you or Henry. I should prefer you because you know all the new steps, but nowadays girls can't choose. . . ."

The Ambassador left the room arm in arm with Hugerson. His face was a little grave. He had not

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disclosed everything which had been written upon that slip.

"James," he confided, "there is someone trying to play the devil with us at the London Embassies. We know about Dimsdale. The poor young fellow threw himself overboard last night, directly the steamer left Southampton, and this morning one of the Italian secretaries blew his brains out just as they were about to arrest him."

"Guess I'm glad so long as I've any secrets to handle that I'm going to have Mark Van Stratton," Mr. Hugerson observed laconically.

Book One

Chapter X

MARK, as he swung round the corner from Queen Street that evening in his two-seater Rolls-Royce, found the space in front of his house occupied by a large limousine. He pulled up behind and, opening the door with his latchkey, was confronted by an utterly unexpected spectacle. In the semi-circular white stone hall, Estelle Dukane was standing, engaged in what seemed to be almost a heated colloquy with Andrews. In the background stood Robert, holding tenaciously to the banisters; half-way up the stairs, the nurse. At the sound of the opening of the door a look of relief was immediately visible on the faces of all three. Estelle turned lightly round. For the moment Mark almost failed to recognise her. She

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was angry and most of her charm seemed to have disappeared with the tightening of the mouth, the cold blaze of the eyes. It was back again, however, directly she saw him. She held out her hand and laughed.

"My friend," she complained, "your servants are very rude to me. They will not let me have a single word with the poor man upstairs, who happens, after all, to be an old acquaintance of mine, and whom I am so anxious to see."

Mark handed his hat and cane to Robert.

"I am sorry," he apologised, "but our invalid is not allowed to see anyone. The doctor was insistent."

"Ah, well, if I may not, I may not," Estelle observed with a resigned little shrug of the shoulders. "So this is your house, Mr. Van Stratton," she continued, looking around at the choice engravings upon the walls, the heavy rugs and the masses of palms and flowers. "Very charming!"

"You'll come in for a moment," he begged, throwing open the door of his library.

"Why not?" she assented. "If you would like to be very sweet you can offer me some tea? My head aches. Everything annoys me. Your servants were so stupid."

He followed her into the room, installed her in his easy-chair, rang the bell and gave the necessary orders. She loosened her fur coat, and finally at his suggestion, abandoned it altogether. She was wearing a silk knitted gown of soft grey, and as she leaned back in the depths of the chair her body seemed more than ever the body of a very young girl. From under the shaded lamp, however, she looked at him with the eyes of a woman who mocks.

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"Well," she asked, "aren't you surprised to find me here?"

"Surprised and very happy," he assured her enthusiastically.

She suddenly frowned.

"I wanted to see that man," she declared. "I wanted to see him very much. Is he going to live or die?"

"I think that he will live, he is in danger of an illness, however. That is why he must not be seen."

She indulged in a little grimace.

"That may be one reason. There is probably another."

"Well, it is his own wish," Mark confided. "He insists upon keeping his door locked, and he is in my house as a guest. When I think how nearly I dumped him in Richmond Park, and left him there to die I feel that I owe him something."

"The blame would not have been yours," she reminded him. "It would have been ours. He is of that class of men who take their lives into their hands and deserve death at any moment. It is odd that you should defend him—against me, too!"

"What do you want of him now?" Mark enquired. "His life?"

"Not at all," she replied coldly. "I am quite indifferent as to whether he lives or dies. I simply want his silence which he came to sell and which my father ought to have secured at any price. . . . May I smoke?"

He gave her a cigarette—the best brand in the world—from a sandal wood box covered on the outside with gold filigree work of a wonderful design, and lit

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it from a softly-burning Turkish lamp. She leaned back in her easy-chair with a little murmur of content. Her eyes travelled round the room and became lit with a faint surprise.

"Did you take this house furnished?" she enquired. He shook his head.

"No, I furnished it myself. I don't like living amongst other people's things."

"Why, you're quite an artist!" she exclaimed. "Your bronzes are all beautiful. That Psyche is amazing, and those two ivories—perfectly placed and wonderful work. Your silverpoints, too. Who told you that little man Daunont was the most wonderful creature in the world?"

"I liked them," he replied. "I bought them before he was famous."

"And your colouring," she went on in a tone of satisfaction. "A deep brown is so restful. It suits me too. Not a single piece of your furniture wrong! I shall have to correct my impressions of you, Mr. Van Stratton. I thought that you were a great, rather clumsy athlete, beautifully strong, and picturesque—oh, yes, quite attractive in your way, but also—well, a little difficult for us people who have French blood to appreciate. But I'm getting to like you better. You must have taste. And these books, too! Do you read Verlaine and Gautier? The volumes seem well-worn."

"French is my only accomplishment," he confessed. "I lived in Paris for so long, and I flew for France before we came into the War."

"Certainly I must change my point of view," she decided. "I'm getting to like you better every

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moment. If there is really anything good to eat for tea I shall be in danger—grave danger ! ”

Almost as she spoke Andrews entered solemnly, followed by his underling. Together they arranged a table drawn up to the fire. Estelle laughed with an air of almost feline content.

“ These dear little muffins ! ” she exclaimed, as the men left the room. “ And what cakes ! My head is being turned, Mr. Van Stratton. You are apparently a man of understanding. Why did I not know last night, when I did not wish to dance with you, that you had a room like this and read Verlaine, and could give me such a tea.”

“ I can give you many more such surprises,” he assured her. “ I have a really beautiful house, or rather a villa, at Beaulieu, and although I suppose you would never go there, I have a house in New Hampshire which is quite a show place.”

“ Paris ? ” she enquired.

“ A bachelor apartment only. Fortunately I am not tied to any place or Country. When you make up your mind to marry me it will be for you to decide.”

“ Marriage,” she reflected stretching out her hand for another muffin, “ is a very serious thing.”

“ For a woman,” he rejoined, “ it is inevitable. Life for a man as a bachelor is possible. For a woman, spinsterhood is sheer barbarity ”

She leaned back in her chair and considered his words. There was an abandon about her pose which stirred him to a vague uneasiness. More than once he had fancied that it amused her out of sheer perversity to affect an unnatural rôle. It was as though she had detected and found pleasure in mocking

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at a certain strain of inherited puritanism, the remnants of which he still possessed.

"I puzzle myself," she admitted. "I believe I am a woman as others—sometimes, alas, I know it—and yet I dread marriage. Marriage is the end of all individuality, especially—forgive me—with men like you. You are what I should call enveloping. You would leave me scarcely a breath in my body, or a thought in my brain, and I want to live and think for myself. Life just now with me is, as it has been during the last four years, a huge and fascinating picture puzzle. The fingers that move the pieces may be my father's, but I, too, watch. I see many things that he overlooks."

"But what does it all lead to?" he asked curiously. "You don't want money. You have all the money in the world now, they say. Personally, I am sorry about it. I have enough for both of us. What is the end and aim of it all?"

She laughed, her head thrown back; the laugh with its spice of mockery which he half loved and half hated.

"One has to go back to the kindergarten to talk to you sometimes," she declared. "That is because you have only one idea—the idea to marry me. It is flattering, but it closes your eyes. Think now. You shall have a simile which appeals to you. You risk your life going into the bush to kill tigers. The actual killing is nothing. You go for the tracking, for the sport of it, for the thrill when you raise your rifle, the danger if you miss, the added thrill of success when you kill. What is the skin to you? What the dead body? Nothing. It is the environment that counts. So it is with me and my life. I live by

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my father's side. One day we are in New York. There comes another and we are in Constantinople. We find ourselves in Paris or Madrid. We loiter incognito in Berlin, and all the time we are in touch with great things. Because you see, after all, money is a great thing. Every human being, every commercial undertaking, every nation wants money. We watch and scheme. We listen. We choose our time of advantage and there is no single bank in Europe can compete with us. There is the pulse of power in such a life."

"Well," he sighed, "I can't argue. I can only tell you that it seems like this to me: that your sense of values is wrong. You are devoting your life to a sport which is scarcely a sport at all. Finance may be attractive to a certain type of brain, but it has nothing to do with the world beautiful. You have. You are laying a crust over yourself day by day, in an unwholesome quest. Turn your thoughts somewhere else. Try to live for once in beautiful places and amongst beautiful things. Give your life to me and I promise that I will put it to better use."

"Sometimes," she confessed, setting down her empty tea cup and selecting a cigarette, "you astonish me. There must be something in you, Mr. Mark Van Stratton, which I have not yet appreciated. Do you know," she went on, "I have always rather prayed that a god might come down to earth and lift my feet and myself right above it. I have not seen any signs of him yet. Do you think that you might be that god?"

"I am," he assured her. "They say that love makes men like gods, and no one could love anyone as I love you."

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"I cannot remember," she reflected, "that you have often mentioned the fact."

"That is because I know that there is nothing so wearisome in this world as for a woman who does not love to be told of his love by a man who does," he answered promptly.

"You read too much fiction," she declared.

"I don't read half a dozen novels in the year."

"Anyhow, you have me in the wrong perspective," she persisted. "As I am at present I am a hopeless person. I may change. When I was a child I was different. I even believed in fairy stories. I may believe in them again. Just now I do not. I am full of other thoughts."

"What sort of thoughts?" he enquired.

"I want to be perfectly certain that if that man upstairs dies, the knowledge he carries about with him dies also."

"Why is this such an urgent need?" he ventured.

"Because I want to help on a little the greatest scheme we—that is my father and I—have ever conceived," she replied. "There is practically only one person in the world who could wreck it—that miserable little creature whose life you are so concerned about. My father was mad to lose his temper with him at that particular moment. You said just now that I did not love you. You were perfectly right. I do not. Then, on the other hand, I love no one else, and love might come any day. It might even come along the highroad of gratitude. You could help me if you would."

"The man is my guest," he reminded her with a certain sternness. "He is safe where he is until he is able to fend for himself."

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"You should make no mistake," she expostulated. "I wish him no personal harm. My father has a violent temper or we should not be in this difficult position. He would not listen to my father now, but he might to me. I wish to obtain possession of his papers, either by strategy or to buy them. Take me up to his room, Mr. Mark Van Stratton. Let me speak to him."

"I cannot do that," Mark regretted.

"Not even when it is I who ask you this as a favour?"

"Not even when it is you."

There was a brief silence. Her face had grown hard. He saw lines about her mouth which he had never noticed before. She threw her cigarette into the fire.

"I do not know why I waste my time here with you then," she observed curtly.

"Out of your kindness, I hope," he ventured. "Because you know that your being here has given me so much pleasure."

She listened without a smile, without an answering look.

"Has he made you the trustee of his secret?" she demanded suddenly.

"Under certain conditions," he acknowledged, "it will come into my hands. If he loses his memory or dies I am to become his legatee, and," he added, "I shall be a faithful one."

She shook some cigarette ash from her gown as she rose to her feet.

"Whereabouts amongst the treasures of your life," she asked coldly, "do you rank this affection of which you speak?"

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"Next to my honour and to that small amount of conscience which every man is allowed," he answered, "and only next because a stain on one would be a stain on the other."

She held out her arms for her coat.

"Convincing," she murmured, "but just a little magniloquent. I am very angry with you, but some day I honestly believe that I may marry either you or your friend, Lord Dorchester. Last night I thought it would be he. This afternoon you have been so brutal to me that I think it may be you. . . . Tell me how your career in diplomacy progresses?"

"I have made the most rapid advancement of modern times," he confided. "Yesterday I was an assistant tame cat, a compiler of dinner lists, a possible chucker-out. This morning I have been asked to do secretarial work for Mr. Hugerson, who is over from Washington on a special mission."

She suddenly let slip the coat which he was in the act of folding round her.

"You speak the truth?" she demanded.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "Mr. Hugerson is one of my father's oldest friends. Rawlinson, the man who was to have looked after him, has fallen sick. I am to take his place."

"Decidedly," she murmured once more, "the chance grows that one day I may marry you."

His arms slid round the shoulders of the smooth sables in which she was now enveloped. For a moment it seemed as though she were yielding. The arms crept further, further. She was imprisoned, yet apart from him by reason of her head thrown back, the warning in her eyes.

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"Not just yet, please," she begged, laughing up at him. "Ring now for your servants. That poor Prince Andrupulo! I forgot all about him. He waits outside in the car."

Book One

Chapter XI

MR. HUGERSON was his usual calm and neatly garbed self when he made his reappearance at Carlton House, but his three weeks' travelling had apparently tired him. His manner, too, as he greeted Mark and threw himself into an easy-chair, lacked a little of his former alertness.

"Did you get my despatches, Mark?" he enquired.

"Seven altogether," was the prompt reply. "One from Paris, two from Rome, one from Athens, one from Vienna, and two wirelessly. I did my best to follow out your instructions."

"Guess I'd better look through the results," Mr. Hugerson suggested.

Mark spoke down his table telephone.

"Quite a wonderful typist, the Chief let me have," he confided. "She has been private secretary to two or three Cabinet Ministers, and one Prime Minister, and never known to make a mistake. She does most of our confidential work here."

"That sounds good to me," Mr. Hugerson admitted.

"We want someone we can trust just now."

There was a knock at the door, and a young woman

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entered carrying a note-book and an official-looking folder. Mark rose to his feet.

"Good morning, Miss Moreland," he said. "This is Mr. Hugerson. He would like to look through the drafts I sent on to Washington compiled from his cables."

"I have everything here," was the quiet reply.

Mr. Hugerson adjusted his spectacles, and the girl sank a little listlessly into the chair which Mark had placed for her. She was dressed with the severe simplicity of her class and profession—a plain black gown, unrelieved even at the neck. She wore no ornaments, her hair was of a dark brown shade, almost black, and, notwithstanding some slight irregularity of feature, was brushed severely back from a high forehead. Her eyes were large, almost beautiful, and her eyebrows faint lines of silk. Her mouth, although in itself shapely, was discontented and ungracious, her cheek-bones slightly prominent, her figure unduly thin. Her silk stockings seemed to be a concession to the demands of the times, and she wore shoes heavy enough for the country, with low heels. Her hands were remarkably well shaped, her fingers long and capable.

"Busy, Miss Moreland?" Mark enquired.

She shook her head.

"Mr. Widdowes has told me to keep myself free for any work you and Mr. Hugerson might have," she replied.

The latter looked up from his folder.

"A very excellent transcription," he announced approvingly. "Lock these up, Mark, if you have a safe. I'd be glad if you'd come back in half an hour, young lady," he added. "I'll just shape out my ideas some."

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Miss Moreland rose and departed, as unobtrusively as she had come. Mr. Hugerson looked after her thoughtfully.

That's the type we need in the States," he remarked. "I'll bet she never opens her mouth too wide."

"She's a wonder," Mark declared enthusiastically. "It's my belief she knows more of the business of this Embassy than the Chief himself."

Mr. Hugerson produced a tortoiseshell tobacco-box, rolled a cigarette, and lit it.

"Well, Mark," he observed, "this has been a queer run round of mine. I'll have to go to Paris again, twice I guess, before I send in my final report, but so far as I can see at present, things seem to have got into queer shape over here. We never did set much store by all these associations and leagues, but I guess, if they're going to function at all, they'll have plenty to do within the next few months."

Mark listened respectfully. Mr. Hugerson had the air of one collecting himself for some mental effort.

"I wouldn't like to go quite so far as this officially," he went on, "but it don't seem to me that I can find a single satisfied Government, a single Country that's hung up its hat upon the peace peg, and don't want any more war. Things are as near a scrap as possible between Italy and Turkey, and if the great man of Italy has his way, there will be war. Drome's the mystery Country, rolling in money all of a sudden, army all paid up, two brand new cruisers in Phaleron Bay, business all booming. Politically there's trouble brewing there. They tell me they'll have a monarchy back in a month or so. They've something up their sleeve. I couldn't make out what it was until I got

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there. I know now. I'm not sure that it wasn't worth while making the trip to find out. There's one man believes in the Country all right."

"Dukane?" Mark enquired.

Mr. Hugerson nodded.

"He's working quietly—working through the National and two other banks—but the money's simply flowing into the Country. I guess I'll have an interesting report to make back home. I met Hiram Browne at the Hotel Grande Bretagne. I'll say he was pretty well the maddest man in Europe. He's been waiting round there for three weeks, with the money in his hand—ten millions—for the Mount Dragma concessions, and he says the Government have just turned him down, after having practically invited him to come over. I found out something else, too, but I guess that'll have to go home."

"Who's our man at Drome?" Mark asked.

"Hopkins," Hugerson replied thoughtfully. "He's a good man, but not enough training—brought up in business, and didn't go into diplomacy until he'd made his pile. He's tumbled on to one thing, though, and I believe he's dead right there—there'll be no settled peace in Europe whilst—well, not just yet, at any rate. . . . Send for the young woman, Mark. I'll get going. . . . Wait a minute, though," he added, "I'll just have a word with Widdowes first."

"Will you go round to his room?"

Mr. Hugerson rose to his feet. Before he could reach the door, however, it had opened to admit the Ambassador.

"Well, was the young man's work all right?" the latter enquired.

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Mr. Hugerson smiled pleasantly.

"Why, sure it was!" he declared. "He figured out twelve despatches from those cables of mine, and I am able to cable the confirmation right away. Good work, young man!"

Mark beamed with pleasure. The Ambassador nodded his congratulations.

"There was just a word I wanted to have with you, Widdowes," Mr. Hugerson went on. "I've given you an abstract of my ideas already. Now I'm going to take the matter up with Washington. This young woman, Miss Moreland—she's all right?"

The Ambassador smiled.

"I should say that, leaving out Mark and myself, she's the safest person in the Embassy. She was private secretary to a Cabinet Minister through the War, and I can tell you that we had to bid money to get her over here. She's the sort that never opens her lips. There's no one I'd sooner trust, Hugerson. That's why I made her over to you."

"That's enough for me," Mr. Hugerson declared. "I'll get to work now."

"See you at luncheon?" the Ambassador asked.

Mr. Hugerson shook his head.

"I guess they've been a little interested in my trip at Downing Street," he observed. "I found two notes waiting for me. I'm lunching with the Foreign Secretary at the Carlton. I shall be back again this afternoon. What are we going to do about this fellow Dukane, Widdowes? They're full of him over at Paris."

"We'd better wait and see what Washington says," Mr. Widdowes suggested thoughtfully.

"I figure it out," Mr. Hugerson reflected, "that his

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commitments in Drome must reach over fifty millions, and if it's true that he's at the back of this other business, he must be handling half the sterling in Europe. They say he never takes a partner either. I shouldn't have thought any one man could carry such a load."

"He's too clever to get caught," Mr. Widdowes declared.

"Maybe."

Miss Moreland, whom Mark had summoned, made her appearance, and the Ambassador took his leave. Mr. Hugerson rose to his feet. His lean fingers were busy with the tobacco box, his eyes were fixed thoughtfully upon the young woman who stood waiting for him.

"I understand you're entirely at my disposition, Miss Moreland," he said.

"Those are my instructions, sir."

"I want you to have one of your typewriters moved in here then," he continued, "and I shall give you down a rather lengthy despatch to Washington. You will take it down at first in the rough. Afterwards I shall go over it, making some revisions, and I shall then require you to re-type it in two copies. One you will hand to Mr. Van Stratton here for his safe, the other we will put into an envelope for Washington. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

Mr. Hugerson deliberately finished rolling his cigarette and lit it.

"Miss Moreland," he concluded, "I think myself very fortunate that Mr. Widdowes was able to spare you to me for the next few days. I needed someone, as I told him, who could be absolutely and entirely relied upon, someone who was not only scrupulously

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honest, but someone who, when they left the building never remembered. That was how we used to put it in the Secret Service Department at Washington, during the War. We needed clerks who 'never remembered'!"

Miss Moreland smiled very faintly.

"I learned the art myself in Downing Street," she assured him. "I am not likely to forget it here."

Book One

Chapter XII

AT six o'clock that evening, Mr. Hugerson, who had been steadily dictating in his low, drawling voice for almost three hours, rose abruptly to his feet.

"Finished for the day," he announced. "I'll leave the notes of my last visit to Paris until to-morrow. How many pages of stuff have you got there, Miss Moreland?"

"Nineteen," she replied.

"Have them put in the Embassy safe for me, please, Van Stratton," Mr. Hugerson begged. "At what time can you start in the morning, Miss Moreland?"

"At any hour you choose," she answered indifferently.

"At half-past nine, then."

He strolled across the room, glanced through several of the loose pages, and nodded.

"Not much revision necessary here, I fancy," he remarked, gathering them into a little pile and handing them to Mark. "Take care of these, young man."

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"They'll go right into the safe, sir," Mark promised. "If you'll come with me as far as the Chief's room, you can see them locked up."

"Guess I'd better," Mr. Hugerson decided.

The two men parted company a few minutes later. Outside, Mark paused for a moment to light a cigarette. Miss Moreland, whom he had encountered upon the threshold, stretched out her fingers.

"Give me one, please," she begged, somewhat to his surprise.

He reopened his case with alacrity. She was in the act of passing on with a nod of thanks, when he stopped her. Under her black hat, her complexion seemed paler than ever—almost unnaturally tired.

"Can I take you home anywhere?" he asked. "I have a car here, if you don't mind a two-seater."

"It is very kind of you," she said doubtfully. "I was just wondering whether I wouldn't indulge in a taxi. The air of those close rooms sometimes almost stifles me."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he insisted, with cheerful emphasis. "You'll come with me."

"I live at Battersea," she told him—"Cyril Mansions. It is really quite an easy run from here, past the Houses of Parliament, and down on to the Embankment."

He helped her into the low, luxurious seat of his Rolls-Royce, and they started off at once. She leaned back with a little exclamation of pleasure. Presently, however, she raised herself in her place. Already the damp wind had brought an unexpected tinge of colour into her cheeks, and the lustre was returning to her eyes.

"Are you the Mr. Van Stratton one reads about in

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the papers?" she enquired. "Polo player and millionaire, and all that sort of thing?"

"I suppose so," he admitted. "You see, I am abandoning my evil ways, though. So far, my work hasn't been very strenuous, but I am hoping soon that they will find me more to do."

She seemed a little unenthusiastic.

"Work alone with nothing outside is sheer and wretched drudgery," she said tonelessly. "Fortunately for you, you have the other things in the background. Your life of pleasure may have been wearisome at times, but at any rate it would be free from tragedy."

"Tragedy?" he repeated.

"The tragedy of loneliness," she answered.

He was for a moment made almost uncomfortable by the bitterness of her tone.

"But surely your life is in every way unique," he pointed out. "You are quoted everywhere as a prodigy. You have worked for such interesting people, and worked always so wonderfully."

"I have," she admitted, "and yet I am thirty years old, and an ordinary woman."

"You mean that you are not engaged to be married, or anything of that sort?" he asked, rather clumsily.

"That is what I do mean," she confessed. "I wish I were."

The usual banalities were impossible. He held his peace until they reached the bridge.

"You have friends, I suppose?" he ventured. "Why not work a little less and go out a little more. One meets people that way."

"The old maid's quest!" she scoffed. "Thank you! I should hate it. I should hate the preparing myself

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for the sacrifice—having my hair done *à la mode*, spending more money than I can afford on clothes, and making myself agreeable to people I should probably dislike.”

“Do you live alone?” he enquired.

“I do. I have a little sitting-room, a smaller bedroom, a bathroom through the doorway of which you could scarcely squeeze your way, and a tiny kitchen. I had a canary once, but I forgot to feed it, and it died. Occasionally someone who wishes to be kind offers me a cat or dog. I refuse because I couldn’t look after them. There are my rooms, at the top of that block of flats,” she pointed out. “I shall climb up there now, and if I have any enterprise in an hour or two, I shall take a bus, come over to a restaurant, have a little dinner alone, and walk back. If the enterprise doesn’t materialise, I shall cook myself an egg and go to bed. To-morrow morning I shall be back at Carlton House at the usual time, and hammer into type the rest of Mr. Hugerson’s adventures.”

“You must admit they’re interesting,” he ventured.

“They’re interesting enough,” she confessed, “but, like everything else that comes to me in life, they come second-hand.”

“I suppose you have some amusement outside your work? Books, for instance?”

“I have had no time in my life for reading. You cannot begin to read fiction unless you develop a taste for it young. I needed my brain for other things in the days when I was more ambitious. Now there is—just nothing.”

He slackened down in front of the building to which she had pointed.

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"One evening," he asked, "would it amuse you to come out and dine with me—do a play or something of that sort?"

She laughed bitterly.

"My dear man!" she exclaimed. "Think how absurd! I have one evening frock, dating from somewhere about war time, I think. I haven't one of the proper etceteras to wear. I have never even been inside the sort of fashionable restaurant you would frequent. I can't dance, and I can't converse after the modern fashion. If you took me out, people would look at you as though you had lost your senses."

"Say, you're getting too bad!" he remonstrated, as he brought the car slowly to a standstill. "Anyway, I'd very much like to take you, if you are game to come. I'll risk the frock, and we'll go somewhere quiet."

"All right," she laughed nervously. "If you're equal to it, I am."

He sat and considered for a moment.

"I'm never quite sure of my time," he confided, "because you see I'm sort of a tame cat at the Embassy, and if they need me to dine or anything I have to be there. To-night I know I'm free. What about to-night?"

"It doesn't give me much time to patch up my raiment," she reflected, a little doubtfully.

"We needn't dine until late. We can leave the theatre for another time."

"I believe I'd rather dine and watch the people," she confessed.

"It's now a quarter to seven," he announced, glancing at his watch. "I'll be round here for you at half-past-eight."

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"If you haven't repented, I'm on the top floor. You'll see my name on the door."

"I'll come right up, then," he promised, "and don't mind keeping me waiting a few minutes if you want to. I'll call in at *Ciro's* and order a table on my way back."

She turned away abruptly, coming for a moment or two into the full stream of light from an electric standard. Mark was puzzled as he threw in his gear. Tears are always a puzzling thing for a man to understand.

Book One

Chapter XIII

MARK was genuinely surprised at his companion's appearance when he led her up the stairs at *Ciro's* to the secluded table he had reserved in the balcony. Her black dress may have seen better days, but it was well made, and she herself, with her long, slim body, disposed of to better advantage under the clinging georgette, was almost graceful. She wore no jewellery, and her hair was still arranged with uncompromising severity, but its quality was fine and glossy and the general effect not without distinction.

"I hope you'll like it up here," he said as they took their places. "I half believed what you said about your frock, and I thought you'd like to be somewhere a little out of the way. Of course I can see now that you were making fun of me."

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She smiled at him gratefully.

"I shall love it up here better than anywhere," she assured him, glancing over the balcony. "One can see everything and not be stared at. And my frock is seven years old, whether you believe it or not. The only lucky thing is that the fashion is coming back again and I haven't had a chance to wear it very often."

"And now for dinner," he suggested, handing her a menu, and taking one himself.

She laid hers down helplessly.

"I've never been in this sort of a place before," she confided, "you must do all the choosing. I like everything."

"Two cocktails, not too dry," he ordered. "A bottle of Pommery 1911, and to eat——"

He selected the courses of their dinner carefully and with frequent references to her. Then they sipped their cocktails and watched the people. There was an awkward interlude of a few moments only: it seemed difficult in these surroundings to attain to the intimacy of their conversation driving home to Battersea in the twilight. Yet somehow or other they drifted back into it with very little effort.

"You were secretary to a great man towards the end of the war, weren't you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, I was in Paris with him. It was quite an experience for me. I had scarcely any friends there and I didn't get on very well with the people immediately round me. They all had their own friends and their own little affairs. I seemed always to be the one left out. I think I was glad to come home."

"I can't understand that at all," he told her frankly.

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She smiled at him, showing very beautiful teeth, and he understood it less than ever.

"Well, you see," she explained, "it was, I think, partly my own fault. Up to the time when one is thirty, when the dread of perpetual spinsterhood becomes a real live thing, one is just a little too critical, a little severe on life. I wanted to be engaged like the others but I wanted to choose for myself—something rather better, I suppose, than my station or looks called for—and all of a sudden I woke up and I realised what had happened. I was middle-aged."

"Thirty years old is nothing for a woman," he protested.

"Thirty years old for a woman who has never even had a sweetheart," she rejoined, "is at any rate the dotage of young womanhood. The only man I could have married I should have had to buy, by working for him as well as for myself. I see him still every two or three months."

"Come, that's something," he said. "Tell me about him."

"What there is to tell isn't exciting," she confided. "He is a clerk down in the city, about my age, better-looking than he deserves to be considering his habits. He makes a reasonable salary and spends every penny of it upon himself. I don't suppose he has five pounds saved in the world. I used to see him a little oftener—not much. We were never really intimate. He wasn't my sort, but he was at any rate a man and I liked him a great deal better than I ever let him know. The last time we met he told me he was looking out for someone with money—that he couldn't marry without it."

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"Well, I don't think much of him then," Mark declared good-humouredly. "Rule him out."

"I can't," she answered, "because he is the only man I have ever seen I felt I could marry. He doesn't want me, or if he does he doesn't want me poor. So that's an end of it."

"You'll meet plenty of other men in time," he assured her.

"I never meet any," she replied. "I had the misfortune for years of my life to be utterly devoted to my work, and to forget that there was a real world moving around me. I woke up a little late. Now, during the last year I have developed a new terror in life—the terror of loneliness."

"Well, you're not going to be lonely this evening, at any rate," he reminded her. "Here comes the caviare. Have you really never tasted it?"

"Never," she admitted. "It looks awful."

He laughed.

"Wait till I spread some on hot toast and butter for you. You'll like it all right."

Conversation became suddenly easier. With the first glass of wine they left serious topics alone. Soon the orchestra began to call to the dancers, and Frances leaned over watching them with fascinated eyes.

"Even though it is only for this once in my life," she said, as she sipped her wine, "I shall be eternally grateful to you for bringing me here. One hears about these sort of places so often, and nobody has ever invited me to visit one."

"On my honour I don't understand it," he declared.

"Men are always afraid of me," she sighed. "They think I am too serious for flirtation, and too

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unattractive to be taken seriously. And I am not at all sure that I am really a serious person at heart," she went on. "I started life that way and I expect I've grown to look forbidding. Do you think if I were to shingle my hair and use a little rouge and lip stick I would collect a few admirers?"

"You would lose one, at any rate," he rejoined. "Your lips are perfect without any of that carmine stuff, and pallor is most fashionable nowadays. It is these girls who sit up until all hours of the morning who have to paint another face on them every day when they get up."

"You're very encouraging," she smiled—"and I never tasted such delicious food in my life. I haven't tasted champagne either since Armistice Day."

"Have you no relatives at all?" he asked.

"An aunt in Australia. I was born in Jersey—an only child. My father and mother both died there. I came to London when I was eighteen years old and went to a girls' hostel. From there I started to work. I suppose in that I was successful. Anyhow work is the only thing that has ever found any place in my life."

"Work has only just crept into mine," he confessed. "I've had a little more than three weeks of it."

She laughed.

"Do you really call what you do 'work'?"

"Not what I've done to-day perhaps, but Mr. Hugerson wanted me to stay around. Mighty interesting stuff that was he was giving down."

She was suddenly mute, her head was moving to the music. Her eyes drifted towards the dancers.

"I believe you want to dance," he exclaimed.

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"I can't," she confessed, a little bitterly.

"Have you never tried?"

"Oh, I have tried alone, and with another girl."

"Come on!" he insisted. "That's just the easiest fox-trot that was ever played. Don't be nervous. Dancing is one of my tricks. I'll take you round."

She rose hesitatingly.

"I know nothing whatever about it," she warned him.

"I might perhaps keep in time with the music."

"You know quite enough about it for me," he told her, a few minutes later. "Just one little break when we started, and now I'll back us against any couple in the room. You don't need to know steps when you can move to the music like that."

They danced until the orchestra stopped and two encores afterwards. When they abandoned the floor Frances's eyes were almost lustrous and there was a delicate pink in her cheeks. She ran on ahead up the stairs with the grace of a young girl.

"Never in my life," she confided, as she sank into her place, and watched the champagne being poured into her glass, "have I enjoyed myself so much."

"Say, that's fine!" he exclaimed. "We'll dance again directly."

She was looking intently over the balustrade. Something of the lightness passed from her face. She leaned a little further forward.

"The young man we have been talking about is down there," she told her companion. "You won't like him. I don't know why I still rather like him myself, but still there it is!"

"The young man with the fair moustache with the elderly lady and two young women?" he asked.

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She nodded.

"Terrible people, I know! They live at St. John's Wood. They have heaps of money and the father gives him orders in his business. He always thinks he'll be allowed to marry one of the daughters. I know he won't because they are Jews and very strict."

Mark studied the young man curiously; an ordinary, rather dissipated-looking person, of apparently about thirty years of age, with a weak, good-humoured face, and a figure which had evidently suffered from lack of exercise. He was making himself very agreeable to his companions and was undoubtedly a great success with them.

"He doesn't seem a bad sort," Mark pronounced. "A trifle frivolous for you, I should have thought."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"But the text of all I have been saying to you this evening," she reminded him, "has been that I am disgusted and tired of my own lack of frivolity. I'd cultivate it in a moment if I could. I'd flirt, let any reasonable man make love to me, do anything to find a little colour in life. I have ruined my best years doing correct things in a severe way."

"See here, don't overdo this," he advised seriously. "Of course I don't believe all you say, but a girl like you is far too good to go chucking herself away upon anyone."

"I don't care," she exclaimed, a little hardly. "I'm sick of my goodness, as you call it. I have tried it and I have found life thin—thin and cold. If I had had time," she went on, "to develop tastes for books, for pictures, opportunities to travel—why then everything would be different. But a working girl

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can't get those things into her life. Therefore she can't be independent. She must have the other things."

"Some day," he threatened, "from a vast experience of life of which you know nothing, I shall read you a severe lecture. In the meantime would you like to dance again?"

She looked at him with a queer little smile.

"I should like nothing on earth so much as to have him see me dancing with you," she confided.

He led her downstairs and they danced four times without leaving the floor. The young man whom she had pointed out watched them with stupefied eyes. Frances waved her hand to him gaily, and he had barely presence of mind enough to respond.

"My *début* in the gay world has been a success," she laughed, as they climbed the stairs again. "He did very nearly once take me to the Palais de Danse at Hammersmith, but he discovered that I had never had a dancing lesson in my life so he backed out. This is a little better than the Palais de Danse, isn't it?"

"I wonder if anything could be done about that young man?" he reflected, after a few minutes' pause. "What sort of business is he in?"

"He's a traveller for a firm of wholesale stationers in Clerkenwell," she said. "He has been there for three or four years now. Were you thinking of buying him for me?"

"Would you like me to?"

"It's a quaint idea," she ruminated. "I don't know. I'm not really quite sure. Just now I don't think I should. . . . In any case, we're talking nonsense," she added. "Tell me, isn't that Felix Dukane down there? I thought he was never seen in a restaurant."

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Mark looked downward. The already familiar thrill, half of pleasure, half of pain, suddenly gripped him. To the principal table on the other side of the room, which had been kept zealously reserved, Estelle was being ushered by Mario himself, and a little retinue of waiters. Her father, grim and unbending, took the place on one side of her. Prince Andropulo, as usual, sleek, immaculate but vaguely unpleasant, seated himself on the other. Estelle, apparently in one of her gayest moods, was laughing and talking to her companion, whilst her father studied the wine card.

"Yes," Mark replied, "that is Dukane, and Prince Andropulo of Drome—and Miss Dukane."

"You know them?"

"Yes."

She studied his expression a little wonderingly.

"You don't mind their seeing you here with me?"

"Why, surely not!" he answered emphatically.

"Was I looking glum? I simply hate that fellow Andropulo."

"He doesn't seem a pleasant person," she admitted.

Estelle glanced up just then and nodded to him with a little questioning wrinkle upon her forehead. Dukane, if he recognised him, took no notice. Prince Andropulo adjusted his horn-rimmed monocle, but Mark had already turned away.

"They are a strange trio," he remarked, "especially the Dukanes. They could enter any society they wanted to here, but they avoid it all the time. Felix Dukane thinks of only one thing in the world—money-making."

"He is a terrible man," Frances murmured. "The most unscrupulous person who ever breathed, they used

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to say at Versailles. He has a small army of spies, and when he can't get the information he wants honestly, he buys it. And look at him! What good is wealth bringing him in life?"

"He doesn't want anything," Mark answered, "except just the joy of seeing his great plans develop. It is the girl I can't understand."

She studied his momentarily gloomy countenance.

"Are you interested in her?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I am sorry," she sighed. "I don't know her, of course, but I am sorry."

"Why?" he enquired. "Don't you find her attractive?"

"Wonderfully. There is no one really like her in the room, but——"

"Well, out with it," he insisted. "You needn't mind me. I've only known her two or three weeks and she hasn't much use for me."

"I shouldn't think that she had any human use for any man in the world," Frances pronounced. "There are just a few people I've seen in all my life whom I should say were utterly heartless. She is one of them."

Mark drank his wine thoughtfully.

"You're not the only one who's told me that," he confessed. "But there it is. I shall have to find out. We can't alter these things, you know. I am older than you, and I've had more flirtations than I'd like to own up to, but I've never felt anything before like I do now. There's more pain about it than pleasure. I suppose that's because I know instinctively or fear instinctively, what you others tell me."

"I am sorry," she murmured once more.

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"Meanwhile," he went on, "this young man of yours keeps on looking up here with longing eyes."

"I'm afraid he wants to come and talk to me," she confided. "He got up just now, but I waved him back. Shall you mind if he does, or must you be rude to him?"

Mark laughed heartily.

"My dear," he begged, "let him come by all means. I'll even allow him a dance with you."

"But I'd rather dance with you," she confessed, "even after what you've just told me."

He avoided the suddenly softened beauty of her eyes.

"Don't disappoint him," he urged. "He is on his way here already, looking a little nervous, but hopeful."

The young man presented himself. His name, it appeared, was Howlett—Sidney Howlett. He accepted an introduction to Mark with bluff cordiality.

"Never was so surprised in my life as to see you two up here," he declared. "I hadn't any idea you cared for dancing, Miss Moreland?"

"I have never had much opportunity to find out whether I did or not," she replied, a little dryly.

"Well, come along and let's see what we make of it," he proposed.

She glanced once more at Mark, and he waved them courteously away. For the first few minutes of their departure he felt the relief of solitude. There was anger in his heart. What was she doing here with that man again, pouring out her sweetness upon him—smiles that meant nothing, looks that meant less, still wastage, something a little lost from the great reserves! He looked frowning downwards. The party of three seemed suddenly a little bored. Estelle was keeping time to the music with her fingers. An impulse of

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courage seized him. He rose from his place, descended the stairs, approached the table, bowed to Estelle and turned to her father.

"May I be allowed to dance with Miss Dukane?" he enquired.

Felix Dukane scowled at him. Mark, however, held out his hand to Estelle as though taking consent for granted. She was obviously doubtful, but half rose and then glanced towards Andropulo.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

He made some inarticulate response, having just at that moment been served with a dish which demanded attention. She rose without any evidence of enthusiasm, passed in front of her father and yielded herself to Mark's clasp. They moved off to the music.

"Why on earth did you have to ask that fellow whether he minded or not?" Mark complained irritably, as soon as they were out of hearing.

She laughed.

"Well, he might have wanted to dance with me himself. After all you're an intervener, aren't you?"

"Not half so much of an intervener as I should like to be," he declared.

"You know perfectly well that you do not deserve that I should dance with you," she said. "You do not merit anything from me at all. You say 'No' to everything I ask. I wanted really to see your invalid. You forbade it."

"Bother my invalid!" he answered. "Heavens, how divinely you dance!"

"You are not so bad yourself," she assured him. "Tell me about your companion? I am curious."

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"I met her for the first time since I went to the Embassy. She has been Secretary to two Cabinet Ministers and is, I believe, marvellously clever. She is shorthand secretary to my temporary chief—Hugerson."

She was obviously startled.

"Hugerson? The man who is over on a special mission from Washington?" she exclaimed.

"That's the chap," he acknowledged. "Old friend of my father's, as it happens."

"It is, after all, a very small world," she reflected.

"It may be a very small world," he agreed, "but there are too many people in it. Prince Andropulo, for instance. Where can I see you to-morrow?"

"Why to-morrow?"

"Because I want to see you every day, and to-morrow is the next."

"Is it my fancy or are you a very persistent person," she enquired.

"I shall be persistent until you take me seriously," he warned her. "You treat me now—well, as though I were talking nonsense all the time. Some day or other you will have to make up your mind that I am in earnest."

"To what extent?"

"To the extent that you are the first woman I have ever loved in my life," he answered, stooping down to whisper in her ear.

For a moment she seemed disturbed. She snatched one glance upwards—almost a natural glance—a glance of wondering curiosity, with just a tinge of something softer in it. Then she swung away from him a little in the dancing, and laughed into his eyes.

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"This is wonderful!" she exclaimed. "What is my proper answer?"

"Your proper answer is to ask me to call and settle matters with your father," he replied promptly.

"My father, as you know," she reminded him, "has awkward habits with undesirable callers. I should try correspondence."

"You permit me?" he demanded eagerly.

"Don't be absurd," she replied. "I haven't the least idea of marrying anyone, and if I had I haven't made up my mind which I like best—you or Prince Andropulo, or your friend Lord Dorchester. And, in any case, my father couldn't spare me. . . . If you didn't dance so well I should make you take me back now, because the Prince is scowling. As it is, however, I think we will dance the encore."

The music started again and they danced in silence for several minutes.

"Tell me some more about Hugerson," she begged, a little abruptly.

"I can only tell you what everyone knows—that he has just returned from a trip upon the Continent."

"You could tell me more interesting things than that about him if you chose."

"Possibly," he admitted, "but I am sure you wouldn't ask me."

She indulged in a little grimace.

"Rather early days, isn't it, for you to adopt an official manner?" she scoffed. "I think you are the most obstinate young man I ever met."

"I am the most faithful," he assured her.

"A thoroughly Anglo-Saxon quality. I am not sure that fidelity ranks amongst the virtues in France."

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"Listen," he pleaded. "We have wasted our time talking nonsense. The music is coming to an end. Can I see you to-morrow, and where, and when? And can I really write to your father and say that I want to marry you?"

"You are ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "How do I know whether I can see you to-morrow or not? I have no idea what I am doing. Besides, you won't tell me anything about Mr. Hugerson. Now please go away nicely and thank me for my dance."

He conducted her to her table, and bade her a formal farewell. She laughed up in his face at his obvious discomfiture.

"It is so hard to believe," she whispered, "that you have ever lived in Paris. You seem to understand Frenchwomen so little."

Book One

Chapter XIV

FRANCES was already in her seat when he regained his table. Mr. Sidney Howlett had taken his departure.

"Well?" he enquired, as he seated himself and poured out some wine. "How did it go?"

"Moderately," she confessed. "He doesn't dance nearly as well as you, and he was desperately inquisitive. What does it matter to anyone with whom I come here or why you should have asked me?"

"He isn't jealous, by any chance, is he?" Mark enquired.

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She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is so thoroughly masculine," she answered. "What he could have had he has never valued until now when he sees someone else paying some slight attention to it. Then he begins to think. When he discovered that you were the great Mr. Van Stratton, millionaire, polo player, diplomatist now—I didn't tell him for how long—he was terribly impressed. I can see him asking himself: if she is attractive enough for him to bring out to a place like this, why haven't I brought her? He is just beginning to wonder whether he hasn't missed something."

"Your analysis of the young man's character," he remarked, "may be true, but it is scarcely flattering."

"I know him so well," she sighed. "He has some good points. I have, as I told you, a kindly feeling for him, but he will never be anything but what he is. No one could improve him. No one could move him out of his rut. If I marry him he will come home late at least three nights in the week, he will seldom take me out, he will expect good food, he will go to a football match on Saturday afternoons, and if he takes me for a walk some time on Sunday he will spend the rest of the day either playing golf on the town course, or billiards in a public-house. If we have children he will consider them a nuisance and he will stay away from home a little more often. If he has money enough he will get drunk now and then. He will consider that he has performed the whole duty of life if he snatches a kiss in the passage before he rushes off to the city in the morning. So many men salve their consciences with that kiss."

"You're not painting a very alluring prospect of

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domestic happiness," Mark observed. "If this is how you really feel I don't think I should rush into it."

"It is better than loneliness," she declared. "If there was anything else offered, perhaps I should prefer it—but it is the loneliness, the icy fingers on my heart that I fear. To escape from that I would do anything."

"Loneliness is a purely relative phrase," he sighed. "One can be lonely in the midst of everything that is wonderful in life, for the sake of one person. One can be mad enough, foolish enough," he went on, "to make that one person the whole guardian of one's happiness. It is foolish, but we others can do that in the midst of a full life, and also find loneliness."

The people were thinning out. Estelle, with her two companions, had departed, without an upward glance. Mark paid his bill.

"Your young man," he observed, "looks up here often."

She nodded.

"I know. He pretends he has something important to say to me and wants to take me home."

"I'll let him, and lend you the car, if you like," Mark suggested. "I can easily get a taxi."

She laid her hand upon his; the first time either of them had indulged in the slightest familiarity.

"Please don't suggest anything of the sort," she begged. "You have given me the most wonderful evening of my life, but you would spoil it if you sent me home with anybody else. Besides, I have already told Mr. Howlett that you are taking me home—sheer vanity—and that if he wants to see me particularly, I will dine with him to-morrow night."

They descended the stairs and took their places in

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Mark's limousine which rolled up almost at once. A slight rain was falling, and the streets were practically deserted.

"I am the most inexperienced person in the world," she confessed. "A man once tried to hold my hand in a taxi in Paris, and I was angry. Now, please, I want you to hold my hand. Do you mind?"

She gave it to him, and leaned back with a little sigh of content, her head very near his shoulder.

"It has been like a beautiful dream," she told him. "I don't know why you asked me to come. I can't imagine what made you. Was it sheer kindness?"

"What an idea!" he remonstrated. "It was more like selfishness. I had a free evening, and I felt sure we should enjoy being together. You will come again?"

"As often as you ask me."

They left the Embankment, and crossed the bridge. She drew a little closer to him.

"This is where I begin to get lonely," she confided. "Do you see how tall and grey and sombre all the buildings seem here, and the trees, how comfortless and how they drip? Look, too, not a soul in sight! People hide around here. I think I have walked up my stairs at night a dozen times, and never seen a soul."

"Perhaps this loneliness," he prophesied, "will not last so very long now. I think you will find that Mr. Sidney Howlett will be round to see you very soon."

"Perhaps so," she answered listlessly. "I am not sure, though, whether I ever want to see him again."

They drew up at the entrance to her flats. She stepped down on the pavement in front of him and moved swiftly to the door. He followed, after a moment's hesitation.

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"What about saying good-night to your host," he suggested.

"You must come up the stairs with me," she insisted. "I do it so many times alone, and half afraid, that to-night I will be escorted. I will go up comfortably and safely and feeling warm inside. Do you mind?"

"Mind? Why should I?"

She passed her arm lightly through his. As they reached the fifth floor she pointed to a little card and handed him a key.

"That is my room," she said. "Open the door, please."

He obeyed, acquiescent but vaguely uneasy. Inside everything was a model of neatness and discomfort. A little fire, however, was burning in the grate.

"You see," she sighed, "it is just as I told you, isn't it? Listen!"

There was no sound to be heard. Even the faint roar of distant traffic seemed like an under-note of silence. He stood there with his hat in his hand, his muffler still round his neck, his coat buttoned up. Her hand suddenly gripped his.

"On Armistice Day," she confided, "two men kissed me. They were both drunk. In Paris later a man tried to, and I was angry. Once, since then, Sidney Howlett kissed me downstairs when he said good-night to me. A dreary record, isn't it?"

He held her fingers firmly and smiled down at her.

"If this had been three days ago," he told her, "I know very well how wonderful it would have been to have changed that. But you realise what has come to me. I told you. I wouldn't hurt you by offering

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what you would know belonged to someone else in my thoughts even if it never reaches her."

She was herself again. With a curious and vigorous effort of will she passed her arm through his and led him lightly to the door.

"You are the dearest person," she declared. "I shall live until you take me out again, and to-morrow I shall help you if you need help. Do you mind turning out the light on the bottom floor there?"

She stood in the open doorway so that he could see his way down the first flight. He looked back and waved his hand. The memory of her farewell smile, as she stepped back, brave and cheerful though it was, filled him with an indefinable sense of reproach.

Book One

Chapter XV

FRANCES MORELAND arrived punctually at her rendezvous on the following evening, took off her gloves, laid them by her plate, and looked around her almost wistfully. There was in her grey, thoughtful eyes an expression of half-agitated reminiscence. It was the same little restaurant, with its Soho-like bustle and its shaded lights, its coarse but clean linen, the few flowers stuck in cheap vases, the monotonous collection of fruit, the chameleonic expression of the short, pudgy proprietor, whose eyes were everywhere, all geniality and smiles for his guests, all severity and angry glances for a delinquent waiter. The smell of food, the haze of

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smoke, the chatter of voices, pitched in a somewhat higher key than an ordinary English restaurant, all brought back to her mind the first time she had dined there with the man who was now her companion—the first time and many times since.

“So we’re really here again,” she observed. “It must be nearly a year.”

“The time slips by,” her *vis-à-vis* admitted. “Shouldn’t have thought it had been as much as that, though.”

“A year within a few days,” she reflected.

He straightened his tie and glanced at himself in the mirror by their side.

“Well,” he remarked, “we’ve neither of us done so badly, eh? Both of us learned a thing or two since then! You’ve got on, of course, better than I have in a way, but I haven’t done so badly. I’m earning at least three quid a week more than I used to, and some extras. I’ve stumbled across rather a good thing in that way. There’s no doubt about it,” he went on, “if you’re clever and keep your eyes open in this world things come to you.”

“What sort of things?” she asked.

“Outside ways of making money,” he explained glibly. “Some time I’ll tell you about ’em. You don’t look a day older, Frances.”

“Don’t I?” she answered, also with a side glance at the mirror.

“There’s something about you,” he continued, leaning a little forward, “makes you quite different from other girls—the sort of girls one takes out, you know; doll themselves up no end, use stuff on their lips and cheeks and have their hair done all stiff and

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wavy by a hairdresser. I used to think—you won't be cross—that you looked a little old-fashioned. Damned if I don't think you're just clever, Frances. You've got what they call 'style'—something superior, you know. I have never forgotten what a shock it gave me to see you sitting up there last night with that young American toff. Why, I was thinking a lot of myself because I was at *Ciro's* at all, and there you were drinking champagne and dancing away as though you had been used to it all your life."

"It was quite a wonderful evening," she remarked thoughtfully.

He looked across the table with something which was almost a scowl.

"I say, Frances, there's nothing between you and that young fellow, is there?"

"A certain amount of friendship, I hope," she answered.

"You see," he proceeded earnestly, "you don't know much of the world—not as I do. That young fellow was one of the American Polo team last year. He's a millionaire, and they say he's just joined the American Embassy. Those fellows want keeping in their place, Frances, what?"

"I have never found the need with Mr. Van Stratton," Frances rejoined, her reminiscent smile a little tinged with bitterness.

"Seen him since?"

"I was working within a few feet of him this morning, as I have been every day for the last three weeks. He talked for a quarter-of-an-hour afterwards," she replied. "He asked me when I was ready to come out to dinner again with him."

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"What did you say?"

"I said any evening he was good enough to ask me."

"You know this won't do," Mr. Sidney Howlett grumbled, leaning across the table. "It's not like you either, Frances. You can't be going about with more than one man at the same time."

"Can't you?" she replied carelessly. "I think I should find it quite easy, provided they asked me. Must I remind you that it is a year within a week since you did me the honour to seem even aware of my existence."

"I've made a bad break, Frances," her companion acknowledged. "I like frankness, and when I'm wrong I'm ready to admit it. We didn't get on very well the last time we met, and I thought it best to keep away for a bit."

"We didn't get on very well," Frances rejoined, "because I told you that with the six pounds a week I was earning and the eight pounds a week you said you were making, it seemed to me that we ought to be thinking about getting married, if ever you meant to get married at all. I was lonely, and I was idiot enough to be frank about it. You agreed to think the matter over, and you went away. I heard nothing of you at all for over two months, and then I received a sort of half-hearted invitation to tea."

"We won't go into all that," he begged. "What I felt was, Frances, that before we got married and settled down we ought to have had something saved."

"I had two hundred pounds in the bank," Frances observed. "If you had nothing it was your own fault."

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"I am hoping very much," he confided significantly, "that before very long we shall have a great deal more than that in the bank. However, we must see how our friend Giovanni has been getting on with his cooking. Soup looks all right."

They commenced their dinner, the young man disposing of his *petite marmite* with audible enthusiasm. Conversation with the service of food became a little more general and a trifle disconnected. Frances alone preserved still that faint air of aloofness, as though her actual presence there were in a way accidental. Her large eyes wandered everywhere throughout the room. Not even the famous chianti brought a flush to her not unbecomingly pale cheeks.

"Glad to be here again?" he asked.

"Very," she answered. "It seems quite natural."

"Poor sort of show after *Ciro's*," he ventured.

"In a way, yes," she admitted. "In a way, no. I think this is more our *entourage*."

Sidney Howlett fumbled with his tie.

"I don't know," he said complacently. "One must see all sides of life of course, if one wants to get on in this world. I must say I felt quite at home at *Ciro's*. It's a club, you know. Some day or other we might join."

"We might," she murmured enigmatically.

"Of course the food here is good of its sort," he went on, attacking his fish, the mysterious origin of which was concealed by its filleted condition and an amazing superabundance of sauce. "I wouldn't say anything against it, and after a long day's work, and you there, Frances, and a bottle of wine, why, just anything tastes good to me."

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"You're improving in conversation," she remarked. "Is that Miss Hampstead's tuition?"

"I wish you'd believe me, Frances," he assured her earnestly, "when I tell you that that little affair is ORPH—off. I have had some big orders from old Hampstead, at a time when I needed them, too, and I make myself useful by taking the old lady and the girls out now and then when the old man's tired. It's good business for me and it suits them. All the same, those girls will have twenty thousand pounds each when they're married—Jewesses, too. What do you think would happen if I were ass enough to propose myself? Why, I should just get shown the door."

"It seems a pity," Frances sympathised. "The smaller one—the one who doesn't squint—might almost be nice-looking if she didn't wear such terrible clothes."

Mr. Sidney Howlett coughed. He had secretly thought their clothes rather smart.

"Well, anyhow, that's that!" he wound up. "What's more important, Frances, is about you and me."

"What about us?" Frances queried with interest, but without excitement.

The arrival of a dismembered chicken in a brown pot proved a hindrance to intimate conversation for a time. A forlorn-looking salad followed, and wine glasses were replenished. Mr. Sidney Howlett was reminded again of his long day's work, and his consequent appetite. He showed admirable powers of concentration.

"One more course, and then dessert," he announced. "Things here haven't changed much, have they, Frances?"

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She shook her head. There was the same elderly cashier taking a benevolent view of her clients from a raised desk, a Swiss lady with gold-rimmed spectacles, and severe but kindly expression, and one or two *habitués* of former days. The head waiter was changed, but two of the other *maîtres d' hôtel* had recognised and welcomed them.

"Yes, it all seems about the same," she admitted. "We are the people who have altered, I suppose."

"I shouldn't say we'd done much of that," he observed. "I don't feel any different."

"I do," she acknowledged. "In a way, I've had a bad year, Sidney."

"A bad year!" he repeated. "Come, I like that! You've had your photograph in several of the illustrated papers—'The Premier Lady Secretary' they called you in one. You've been working for Cabinet Ministers and all sorts of toffs, and now I hear you have been specially engaged to work for this man Hugerson at the American Embassy. A bad year! I like that, I must say!"

"How did you know that I was at the American Embassy?" she enquired curiously.

He smiled in mysterious fashion.

"Wait until dessert," he enjoined. "I shall have something to say to you then."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As a matter of fact," she confided, "when I was speaking of having a bad year, I didn't mean with regard to my work. I was thinking about my life, inside. I have been wretchedly lonely."

"I'm sorry about that, old girl," he ventured.

"I have worked very hard all my life," she went on.

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‘I have read very little and I haven’t had time for much thinking. In the gulf of this last year I seem to have stumbled against all sorts of new emotions, new miseries. There must have been some sort of change inside me. I don’t know. From twenty-eight to twenty-nine isn’t a particularly eventful epoch of anyone’s life, yet it seems to have been one of my milestones. I never thought there was so much pain in the world that didn’t come from actual trouble, so much pain that sort of woke up inside one for want of things.’

He stared at her, his weak eyes blinking quickly. She seemed to be looking through him. He reached out and patted her hand across the table.

“Poor old thing!” he murmured. “Shouldn’t have left you alone all this time.”

“It was scarcely you personally,” she told him. “It was the things you represented. You see, for two or three years we were together a good deal and with that amazing, inconsequential narrowness of women I forgot to notice that there were other men in the world, and then you stopped coming and it was a little late.”

The young man’s hand caressed his stubbly moustache, carefully cut to imitate the military style of a few years ago. On the whole this was rather flattering.

“Well,” he said, “if you’ve had a bad year, Frances, I should like to make the next one a good one for you. I believe I see a way in which if I can bring you to my way of thinking we might get married in about six months—get married comfortably, mind, with a little house of our own, anywhere you like to choose. They’re opening up some new places about fifteen miles out on the Great Northern—slap up little houses,

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cement fronts and gables and a garden, with fields all round, and cheap season tickets—regular little garden cities where they've got a cinema and golf links and tennis courts of their own. And my work being a bit independent, I needn't go in Saturdays, and, if my scheme comes off, now and then not on Mondays, either. What about that? Sounds all right, doesn't it?"

The smile at the corners of her lips puzzled him. He could never have realised the conflict between her two selves; the primitiveness of the woman and the mockery of her brain.

"What is this scheme of yours, Sidney?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Not here. Too many ears around. Tell you going home."

They drank coffee, smoked several cigarettes, and Sidney Howlett chatted for a few minutes in a lordly fashion with the proprietor, explaining that the more important class of customers with whom he was now in touch demanded entertainment further West—Ciro's and those sort of places—but he'd be back as often as he could. Frances listened with the old smile upon her lips. She made no objection when he slipped his hand under her arm, as they left the place. They walked to Oxford Street, and took a bus to Battersea.

"I'd have taken you to the pictures, Frances," he told her, "but I'd really like to get this talk off my chest."

"You're making me very curious," she confessed.

"Well, you won't have much longer to wait," he pointed out, as they crossed the river, eight aside in a

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crowded bus, steaming with the odour of macintoshes and wet umbrellas.

Frances drew a sigh of relief when they alighted.

"You're coming up then?" she asked.

"If I may."

They mounted the five flights of stone stairs and entered her simple little apartment. She lit the lights, turned on the gas stove and glanced speculatively into her cupboard.

"I used to keep a bottle of whisky for you," she observed, "but I've nothing of that sort now. If you want some more coffee later——"

"Capital!" he declared. "Now come on, old girl! You know how I used to like to have you."

He seated himself in the easy-chair, with a foot-stool close to his knee. She hesitated for a moment.

"I'm not quite sure, Sidney," she said.

He laughed and drew her down, advancing his knee for her support. She sat with clasped hands, looking away into the further recesses of the little room.

"It's like this, Frances," he began. "The city's a queer place. You come across all sorts of people. For instance, in a coffee house where I go to play draughts sometimes, or dominoes, for half an hour after lunch, now and again I take one or two of the smaller customers with me—there's a funny old man I've known by sight for years. Lately he's begun to talk. I'm not quite sure that he is English. He talks all right, but he hesitates for a word occasionally. He surprised me the other day by asking where was the young lady I used to bring to dinner at the Pomme d'or. I told him I hadn't been seeing so much of you, and he laughed at me. 'More fool you!' he said.

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‘There’s a young lady, who, if she chose, could make your fortune.’ ”

“ I make your fortune ! ” Frances repeated wonderingly.

“ That’s how he begun. Of course I asked him what he meant, and at first he wouldn’t tell me. When he did—well, I was fairly taken aback, Frances, to think that he should know all the things he did. He knew your name, and he knew the names of everyone for whom you’d worked. He knew that you were doing this job for the American, Hugerson. He even knew—and that’s more than I did—what the nature of it was.”

“ What is it ? ” she asked incredulously.

“ You are taking down what they call a *précis* of Hugerson’s visit to different parts of Europe,” he replied, “ records of his conversations with various politicians, his opinion as to whether they’re straight or not, extracts from the Consular reports of some of the Countries. Sooner or later, he will probably let the cat out of the bag as to what he really believes about the existence of a secret treaty between Italy and Drome, and he will probably have a lot to say, if he hasn’t said it already, about the internal conditions of Drome, and the elbowing out of American capitalists. What about that, young lady ? ”

She looked up into his face in blank amazement.

“ But who is this wonderful friend of yours ? ” she gasped.

“ Is he right ? ”

“ Very nearly.”

“ Well, to tell you the truth, I haven’t any idea who he is,” Howlett admitted. “ Anyway, he knows things, doesn’t he ? ”

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"He certainly does," Frances acknowledged. More than is good for him, I should think."

"A few days ago," Sidney Howlett continued, "he spread himself. That's what he did—he spread himself. He asked me to dine with him at Frascati's, and he made me a proposition. Now, take this quietly, Frances. We're ordinary human beings, you and I, and we've got to live like other people and money ain't too easy to get. It's just having a bit of money that makes us able to do things or not to do them. Take it easy!"

"I am prepared for anything," she assured him.

"You use clean carbons, of course, all the time. He wants you to use a fresh one for each page you put in your typewriter, and from now on he'll buy them from you. As he points out, there's no risk in that. Used carbons are worthless things. He's not asking you to sell a copy of your work. He's asking just for those used carbons from now until Hugerson has finished his reports, and he'll give us—listen, Frances—ten thousand pounds for them."

She sat quite still, stunned for a moment, unable to analyse her own sensations, to feel anything clearly. Out of the confusion of her mind she ventured an almost automatic question.

"But what on earth could he do with them?"

"He has a machine—he or his friend, or whoever it is behind him," Sidney Howlett explained, "that applies great pressure or something of the sort, on to a peculiar paper, and which can reproduce the impression of anything. It was a French discovery a few years ago."

Frances relapsed once more into silence. Once,

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during the War, when she had been secretary to a famous man, something of this sort had occurred to her—an offer of a pearl necklace for a copy of a single letter, an offer inspired by a fantastic journalist on the staff of a newspaper in bad repute with her chief. She remembered the volcano of scorn she had poured out, her almost tigress-like attack upon the man. There was nothing of this in her veins now. She simply felt numbed.

“Ten thousand pounds,” he went on, gaining confidence by her speechlessness, “is what I call absolute and luxurious security. We will buy a house and either a small car or a motor cycle and side-car. Then we invest say seven or eight thousand and we know that whatever happens we have a nice little income there and we can afford to face anything. I go ahead with my work cheerfully, and you can have a little servant and live like a lady, do just as much as you want to, and if you want to keep on with your job and come up with me in the morning and back at night for a time, why, there’s nothing to stop it—not at first. I hope there would be later.”

“Don’t, Sidney,” she begged. “I can’t bear it for a moment. Do you mind just letting me think?”

He threw away the extinguished cigar he had been holding, and lit a cigarette. Crouched at his feet, her eyes wide open, her hands clasped in the little room where she had woven so many sad dreams from which she had gone so often weeping to bed in the room where those grey waves of tragic loneliness had first broken over her, had become continually her horrible visitants, had threatened almost to engulf her, she considered the nightmare of his words. She remembered a time not

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so many hours ago when she had vowed herself to sin or to crime or to any form of ill-doing to escape from the black thing she feared. Now the chance had come—brought by the man she half despised, half unworthily loved—come with the pictures of the little house, the babies, the fuller, simpler, absurd life ridiculous Nature had made the best. Suddenly she sprang up, a sense of stifling at her throat, and pushed open the window. Across the way the wet leaves of a tall grove of elm trees were rustling together, rain was still visible, falling round the lamp posts, the policeman's cape below shone in the reflected light. Her temples were throbbing, but as she stood there her brain seemed to clear. Curiously enough, all her indignation had gone. Perhaps she felt it would have been wasted upon the man who sat there waiting for her answer.

"Do you know who your friend's employers are, Sidney?" she asked him.

"Not on your life," was the prompt reply. "I don't know that I want to particularly."

"I am trying to think," she reflected, "to whom this information could be of such importance."

"Ask me another," he demanded. "To me it's a looney business, but I don't mind telling you that when I said so to our friend, he passed me across a hundred of the best to show that he was in earnest. Fifty will be yours, to-night, Frances, if you come over."

"One of the American attachés," she reflected, "has already been sent away in disgrace for imparting information, and a young Italian is supposed to have shot himself."

"You don't run any risk," he pointed out eagerly.

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"No one would ever dream of the carbons being worth anything."

"I'm not thinking of my personal risk," she answered. "I'm wondering how much harm this might do."

"What's the good of worrying about that?" he argued. "I tell you this world was never built for those who are always thinking about other people. It's a world of egoists, it's a world where unless you push for yourself, no one else is going to see about it for you. You and I have got our chance, Frances. It's up to us to take it."

"How do you know that your friend will keep his word?" she asked. "Ten thousand pounds is a great deal of money."

"He'll pay five thousand down with the first sheets of carbon I send him—to-morrow's, if we start to-morrow; the other five thousand pounds the day Mr. Hugerson finishes. You haven't destroyed any carbons, have you, Frances?" he added eagerly.

"No, I haven't destroyed any," she admitted.

"And you always use fresh ones? I remember you telling me so."

"Yes, I always use fresh ones."

"That's all right then," he declared, with a sigh of relief. "Of course he didn't stipulate about the work that's already done, but it's just as well to have the lot. I tell you what I'll do," he went on eagerly. "I'll prove I mean to play fair. You shall hold the whole of the first five thousand. I'll pass the money over to you directly I get it, and we'll go and look at houses next week. We'll spend nothing except on our joint account. How's that?"

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"It seems fair," she acknowledged.

She closed the window and returned to his side.

"Supposing I decide, Sidney," she began——

"I meet you when you come out to-morrow," he interrupted. "You just hand me over the carbons when we get into a safe place, and that's all there is to it. We'll meet somewhere for supper, if you like, and I'll give you the five thousand. I'd take you down to the city, you could see the man for yourself, but I think you're best out of it."

She sighed.

"Very well," she decided, "you can meet me, anyhow. I may change my mind, but I don't think I shall."

He passed his arm round her waist. Their lips met. She accepted his kisses quietly at first, then, with almost a note of passion she returned them fervently, and afterwards drew gently away. Hopelessly commonplace though he was, he had wit enough to appreciate the wonderful light in her eyes.

"You're fond of me still, Frances?" he asked, a little breathlessly.

"Yes, dear," she confessed, leading him to the door. "I'm fond of you, and I'm fonder still of the things you represent, and I hate more than anything on earth or in hell what you may save me from."

She listened to his steps descending the stone stairs; firm, heavy steps, not too buoyant, but with a man's weight above them. Then she turned back and locked the door.

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Book Two

Chapter I

RAOUL DE FONTANAY studied his companions thoughtfully as the three men once more seated themselves at their accustomed table in the restaurant of the Ritz Hotel. There was a distinct change in their demeanour since their last celebration. Mark was unusually silent and absorbed: Henry Dorchester almost morose.

"If I were to be born again," de Fontanay declared, with some asperity, as he unfolded his napkin, and glanced at the menu, "I would be a Mohammedan. Women in these Christian Countries occupy too large a share of our thoughts and interests. Man's metier after all, is accomplishment. The playthings of the world should be kept in their places."

"This from a Frenchman!" Dorchester exclaimed. "An adorer of the sex!"

"In their place, yes," was the prompt rejoinder. "I have told you many times what my idea of that place is. Yet you two, whom I once fancied my disciples, have forgotten."

"I have come to the conclusion," Mark declared, "that the average Frenchman has no sentiment."

"Ah!" de Fontanay murmured.

"He is a hunter of women," Mark continued, "a reveller in their caresses and embraces, but it is the sex which appeals to him, not the individual."

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"I am inclined to agree with you," Dorchester assented. "He misses the great pleasures, but he saves himself the pain."

"You two," de Fontanay pronounced deliberately—"you are the worst, of course, Mark—are like a couple of love-lorn lunatics. You both have one of these absurd fancies for the same woman—a fancy which you dignify by the name of 'Love,' but which as neither of you know anything about her, is a sort of conglomeration of passion, and sentiment, wholly created by your imaginations. Love, if it exists at all, is of slower growth . . . Henri," he added, turning round to a hovering *maître d'hôtel*, "the caviare is not so small as last week. How does that arrive?"

"The perfect caviare," Henri confessed, "is hard now to find. One does one's best."

"Perfect! Who expects perfection?" de Fontanay grumbled. "Nothing that is left in the world these days is more than a substitute for the things which went before. Let us, however, cease being cynical. Mark, my congratulations! You are an instance of how malleable we all in effect are. A few weeks ago, you had the appearance of a pleasure-loving young athlete, *et voilà tout!* To-day you have cultivated the air and manners of a diplomatist."

"That's right! Chaff away!" Mark grumbled. "All the same, I wish I'd never left the Service."

"Which do you find the more interesting—the social side of it, or your special job?" Dorchester enquired.

"The work with Hugerson, of course," Mark replied. "But how did you know anything about it?"

"One hears things," his friend observed, with a little wave of the hand. "Hugerson's a tremendously

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interesting personality, Mark. I'd like to meet him. A man whom Washington can trust to flit about in the different Countries of Europe and pronounce judgment not only on their financial possibilities, but on their political aspirations, must be a man with insight."

"Hugerson is undoubtedly that," Mark assented.

De Fontanay moved uneasily in his chair.

"Yet how can a stranger come here," he demanded, "and in a few weeks, perhaps in a few months, sit in judgment upon the Countries of Europe? What does he know of their racial prejudices, of their sense of values? He can just take out the statistics of their taxation, the amount of their imports, the normal revenue, and behold he comes to a *cul-de-sac*. He cannot realise how passion can influence unheard of millions, how racial hatred can sweep aside material barriers."

"We are on the borderland," Henry Dorchester observed, picking up the menu, "of controversial subjects. Let us agree that it is impossible to reduce the interests of different Countries to a common denomination, and let us take it for granted that Hugerson has sufficient genius to realise that. To-day," he added, "I have ordered a chateaubriand. A chateaubriand requires digestion. We must avoid subjects likely to stir the feelings unduly, or to provoke disputative discussions. Digestion must be our aim. Let us speak, therefore, of the subject at which Raoul has hinted in his opening remarks this morning. Tell us exactly, Mark, what it is that appeals to you so much in Estelle Dukane?"

Mark's seat commanded the entrance to the

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restaurant. He suddenly sat upright. His sombre expression was transfigured.

"Herself!" he exclaimed.

She came swinging down the room, Prince Andropulo in the rear, an obsequious *maitre d'hôtel* in advance. She was wearing a rose-coloured costume trimmed with grey fur and she walked with the spring of perfect health; the movement of one happy to be alive. Her eyes looked graciously on every side, her lips were ready to smile. Her way led her past the table where the three men sat, and she stopped at once, regardless of her companion.

"You three nice people!" she exclaimed, as they rose to their feet. "How faithful you are to one another. You lunch together here always?"

"At regular intervals," de Fontanay told her. "It has been a custom of ours since the war."

"What a friendship!" she murmured. "And you," she added, smiling up at Mark, "how goes the new career? All your time is now occupied? Yes? You have no time even to think of your old friends, or your new ones?"

"My career has not so far made very strenuous demands upon me," Mark replied, a little taken aback.

"My father has gone to Paris this morning," she went on. "I am staying with Prince Andropulo's mother at Claridge's. If you have time, come in and see me, Mr. Van Stratton—and you, too, Lord Dorchester. Colonel de Fontanay knows he is always welcome at any time."

"When may I come?" Mark asked, with eager directness.

"Well, I won't promise you tea, because I hate it,"

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she confided. "The hour before I change—say from six to seven, finds me always at home and always ready to be entertained. Au revoir, all of you."

She passed on and they resumed their seats. Mark, notwithstanding his elation, scowled as he watched the Prince holding her chair.

"Curse that fellow!" he exclaimed. "What on earth does she want to come out with him for?"

"You will never," de Fontanay pronounced, "be able to judge Mademoiselle Dukane by ordinary standards. She is a Parisienne to the finger tips and to be a Parisienne means that she is going to do just what she chooses somehow or other. *Par exemple*, a married Frenchwoman who has made up her mind to deceive her husband, does so, but if she has a kind heart, she shows it by being even more amiable to him, and by taking extra pains that he never discovers her infidelity."

"These are interesting generalities," Dorchester observed, "but I agree with Mark. I can't see what pleasure she finds in going about with a fellow like that."

"You ignore one of the guiding principles of her life," de Fontanay reminded his two friends. "They say that she is her father's associate, almost his partner, in many of his great enterprises. You may be very sure that they want something from Prince Andropulo. I suppose he will reign some day and there is a great deal of undeveloped wealth in his Country. If all the rumours one hears are true, Felix Dukane has already discovered that."

"And according to other rumours," Dorchester added, glancing around and dropping his voice a little, "Hugerson didn't waste his time in Drome. You know all about that, Mark."

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Mark shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Hugerson's reports, of course, are private," he said. "I don't put them into shape, either. Miss Moreland does that."

De Fontanay sipped his wine approvingly, and set down the glass.

"Talking of women," he remarked, "that is another thing in this Country which surprises me. In France, we should never dream of dictating important Government reports to a young person of the other sex."

"Miss Moreland," Mark pointed out, "is in her way quite unique."

"Everybody knows her," Dorchester put in. "She has been private secretary to two Cabinet Ministers—one the Premier—and did wonderful work at the Peace Conference."

"As a matter of fact," Mark went on, "I was thinking about this the other day, but I came to the conclusion that it would be absolutely impossible to tempt a woman like that. She must earn a great deal more money than she can spend, and I can assure you of my own knowledge that she has no frivolous tastes. Imagine, for instance, that Felix Dukane, who might be supposed to be interested, wanted to ascertain Mr Hugerson's conclusions on certain European matters a little beforehand—I can quite understand that it would be a great advantage to him—what sort of a bribe could he offer to a person in that position? He might just as well talk to Hugerson himself."

"Theoretically, I agree," de Fontanay assented dubiously, "and yet when one comes to the inner shades of diplomacy, I have never felt the same confidence when the woman creeps in. I must confess

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I was surprised when I heard—quite by chance—that she was practically established as Hugerson's private secretary, and was preparing a précis of the whole of his conclusions for Washington. I should have thought that one of the permanent secretaries of the Embassy would have done that."

"I don't believe," Dorchester asserted, "that in the whole of the American Embassy they could find anyone so quick or so accurate. I know that when she was private secretary to Johnson-Mairs, he declared that in four years she had never made a mistake of any sort, taken down a wrong word or left one out. Her shorthand is simply magic, and her discretion unimpeachable. No, I should say Hugerson had been lucky to get hold of her. What do you think, Mark?"

Mark had been silent for the last few minutes. He answered now almost with reluctance.

"Why, of course you're right," he conceded. "I just can't imagine anyone seriously doubting Miss Moreland's honesty any more than they would her capacity. I haven't seen a whole lot of her, but what I have seen is simply beyond criticism. There's just one other way of looking at it though. Hugerson knows better than any of us, but I can't help feeling that a report of such importance as he is engaged upon at present should be drafted by a permanent official. It seems scarcely fair on the girl herself to place such a tremendous responsibility upon her. Supposing anything did leak out before the report reached Washington, for instance? She would naturally come under suspicion, and she might not have been responsible in any way. It might have been just a word from Hugerson in one of the places he's been

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visiting, just a sentence overheard by one of the hangers-on where he was calling, or even one of the men himself with whom he has had dealings. All the same, she'd get the blame."

De Fontanay sipped his wine.

"The subject interests me," he confided, "because I happen to know that there are several bidders for early information as to some of Hugerson's conclusions . . . However, enough of politics. Mark, to America ; Dorchester, to England."

"Raoul, to France," they both reciprocated.

Their usual toasts were drunk, and presently they rose from the table. Estelle, looking thoroughly bored with her companion, was leaning back in her chair. She waved her hand to them gaily, and her lips moved as though to remind Mark of the evening. He made his way presently back to the Embassy, conscious of a sudden relief from the depression of the last few days. He had a conviction that Andropulo was, after all, only a pawn in the game upon which Estelle and her father were engaged. And before the great battle developed, the pawns had usually vanished from the board.

Book Two

Chapter II

MARK, ushered upon his arrival into the drawing-room of an imposing suite upon the first floor of Claridge's Hotel, was received in due course by Estelle,

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who introduced him to an elderly and even fatter replica of Prince Andropulo.

"Let me present Mr. Van Stratton—Her Majesty, the Dowager Queen of Drome. I know you don't care about tea, Mr. Van Stratton. I wonder whether you would like to dance for half an hour?"

"There is nothing in the world I should enjoy more," he assured her, after he had raised to his lips the pudgy fingers extended to him by Andropulo's mother.

"We will go downstairs at once, then," she suggested. "From here the music sounds entrancing. I have already made our excuses to her Majesty."

Estelle laid her fingers upon his arm as they passed along the corridor: a note of familiarity which brought him a curious thrill.

"You see, Madame doesn't quite understand the Bohemian life which father and I have chosen to lead," she explained. "I suppose we could have all the friends we like. We prefer none. It seems it is not *convenable* for me to receive you in my suite, and as the dear old lady thinks that some day I will marry her son she has planted herself there. I thought you would find dancing more amusing than a conversation *à trois*."

"I would indeed," he assured her. "And perhaps we might find a corner and talk for a few minutes ourselves now and then."

"What do you want to talk to me about?" she asked.

"For one thing I should like to tell you just what I think of you," he answered, as he rang the bell for the lift.

"And then?"

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"I would like you to tell me just what you think of me."

She laughed softly.

"You are very frank."

"A national characteristic," he confided, lowering his voice and glancing round. "You know quite well that I want you to marry me."

"But I do not want to marry anybody," she protested.

"You must some day."

She sighed.

"I suppose so . . . Tell me why you want to marry me? Just because I am pretty? That is not much, you know. There are beautiful girls in London—any quantity of them. Mine is not a wonderful type."

"It is just because you are yourself," he confessed. "You are the most attractive thing I ever saw. You can look things out of your eyes which would turn any man's head. Sometimes I wish you wouldn't do it."

She laughed.

"But then you must remember I am French. I know that I flirt. If I were engaged to you, you would probably be jealous."

"In time," he assured her, "you would care for me so much that you wouldn't look at these other men."

"Then life would be very dull," she complained. "Again I must remind you that French women are not like that. We must flirt after marriage just as much as before—perhaps a little more. It is the only thing which keeps us young."

"I fancy there are a few other things in life I could give you to think about," he declared.

She made an entrancing little grimace.

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"I think," she told him, "that the lift is here and I can hear the music."

"Of course," Estelle admitted, half an hour later, "it would be a great thing to have one's husband dance as wonderfully as you."

"It would be a marvellous thing," he rejoined, "to own anyone who feels like you do in one's arms."

"I suppose I shall have to think about it," she sighed, "some day. But then you know, there's Lord Dorchester. I couldn't bear to make him unhappy."

"You could flirt with him to a modified extent after we were married," Mark suggested.

"Do you suppose," she asked indignantly, "that any man would be satisfied to flirt with me to a modified extent?"

"Perhaps not. But if you were married to me no one would do more."

There was a pause in the music. They seated themselves in two convenient chairs.

"Now that we have found a quiet little corner," she said, her manner suddenly more serious, "let us talk for a moment. Do you really know that you could give much pleasure by just a few words?"

"Whatever you want in this world," he began breathlessly.

"You must not be so precipitate," she interrupted. "You do not quite understand yet. I may not be able to make you understand at all. But you could help my father and me, and in a way which would do no one any harm."

He looked at her anxiously.

"You mean—my guest? He is getting better, but

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there is nothing to be done with him at present. He has a strange fit just now. He does not wish even to see me."

She shook her head.

"I was not thinking of him," she said. "I was thinking of your new position as assistant secretary to Mr. Hugerson."

He stiffened at once, unconsciously, but with some premonition of disturbance.

"Not much of a position, I am afraid," he confided. "Mr. Hugerson likes me round because my father was an old friend of his. I just fetch and carry books from the library, messages to the Chief, statistics from the bureau, and odd jobs of that sort. Miss Moreland does all the work."

"Really?" she murmured coldly.

"It's the truth," he asserted. "I can't use a typewriter."

"You're in the room a great deal of the time, I suppose? You have perhaps gathered what Mr. Hugerson's impressions are of, say the financial position of Drome?"

"Everything that Mr. Hugerson says," he assured her, "when it isn't addressed to me, comes in at one ear and goes out of the other. They tell me that's the first lesson in diplomacy, and you must remember I'm only in the nursery."

"Nevertheless," she said, "I shall ask you a question. Does Mr. Hugerson know how much money my father has invested in Drome? Does he know the number and amount of the concessions which we hold? Does he know, does he believe that there is any understanding between the Republican Government of Drome, General

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Matteos, who represents the Royalist interests, and the Government of Italy? We all know that those are some things he came over to enquire about. How much has he learned, and what is he going to do about it?"

Mark seemed to have grown suddenly older. He looked away from his companion, across the crowded lounge, where people were seated in pleasant groups, drinking tea or cocktails, on into the dancing room, from which came the rhythmical music of the orchestra. She waited for speech, and finally questioned him impatiently.

"Why do you not reply?" she demanded. "Why do you sit there and say nothing?"

"To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I was half hoping to hear you say that you were not in earnest."

"But of course I am in earnest," she insisted. "You say curious things to me sometimes. You try to make me believe that you care. If you do, why should I not ask you anything—everything in the world? I may put you to the test, may I not?"

Her forehead was wrinkled. She had an air of almost pathetic lack of understanding. Mark himself felt suddenly older, a little tired with the world which a few minutes before had seemed so wonderful. So this was the reason of her kindness! He was to be made use of, cajoled into dishonour! He looked once more at her. What he saw surprised him. He had expected that slight tightening of the lips, the hardness which sometimes came into her eyes. Nothing of the sort was apparent. Her smile was inviting, almost affectionate, her expression tender, her eyes sweet. Her attitude made it even more difficult.

"You must see," he protested, "that even if I were

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in a position to know these things, I could not disclose them."

"But why not?" she reasoned, still without resentment, without a trace of anger. "I have heard of men doing all sorts of things to prove that they really cared. This is not so hard. It would not hurt a soul. In fact it would do good."

"I have learned very little of the result of Mr. Hugerson's mission," he said, this time firmly enough. "The little I have learned, I could not possibly divulge to anyone."

For a moment there was silence. He did not dare to look at her. He felt the change without seeking for its signs. Presently she rose.

"Let us dance," she suggested.

They made their way back to the room and danced, still in absolute silence. Mark was acutely conscious of his companion's altered attitude, of an entire departure of the ecstasy of the earlier part of the afternoon. Her eyes no longer met his as he looked down, her lips no longer broke into a happy little smile at the rhythm of the music. She glanced around all the time as though searching for interest or amusement elsewhere. Her feet followed his mechanically. She expressed no pleasure when they paused for the encore. She danced as one dances from a sense of duty. Afterwards, when he led the way back to the lounge, she chose a more public seat.

"I daresay you would like to go presently," she remarked, glancing at the clock. "You are probably dining somewhere, and so am I."

"Are you dining with that fellow Andropulo?" he demanded.

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"Why not?" she rejoined. "He deserves that I should. There is nothing in the world he would not do if I would promise him what I nearly promised you. Besides, Prince Andropulo is my friend."

"I am sorry to hear it," he declared.

"Really, you are impossible," she complained. "It is I who should be bad-tempered, and not you."

"Because I refuse to do a thing no honourable man would think of doing?"

"*Oh la, la!*" she scoffed. "Don't be so stiff and wooden. Every action in the world becomes different according to circumstances. You simply do not understand. The truth is that you do not care enough. Why should you? You have not known me very long. I am not a very wonderful person, after all."

"Perhaps you are not," he agreed, a little hardly. "I don't think at this moment that you are worth everything I feel for you, and yet I know I couldn't feel as I do, in the way I do, if there wasn't something there I haven't got at yet. If I could make you care you'd understand, but I should never make you any fonder of me by doing such a thing as you've asked me this afternoon—even if you gave me the husks of your gratitude."

She shook her head.

"There is no mystery about me," she said coldly. "I am just a very natural person, a little spoilt, perhaps, who likes her own way and likes the people who give it to her. I am not so angry with you as you think, Mr. Mark Van Stratton. I am just sorry for your limitations. I should like to see in you a man who when he loves or says he loves, gives all. Perhaps then you might discover in me that something which

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you say is there, and which I do not know of. If you found it, it would be yours."

Dorchester, arrived breathless from the House of Commons, lingered upon the threshold for a moment, and, seeing them, dropped his eye-glass and approached. Estelle welcomed him gaily.

"Come," he declared, "you've been monopolising Miss Dukane long enough, Mark. You won't mind my having a dance?"

Mark rose to his feet, assenting dumbly. Estelle nodded her farewell.

"It will have to be almost the last one," she confided, "so I will say good-night, Mr. Van Stratton. I have to change early."

She held out her arms to her partner and they moved off. Mark remaining where he was for a few moments, watched them dance, watched her laughing up into her partner's face, her entire attention apparently riveted upon him, watched him lean down to respond—the whole pantomime of dancing between intimates. Then he turned around, took his hat and coat from the *vestiaire* and left.

AN elderly man-servant, in dark, worn plum-coloured livery, opened the door of de Fontanay's little suite in the Marylebone Road, in response to Mark's somewhat impatient ring, a few minutes later. The faint

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querulousness of his expression disappeared as soon as he recognised the visitor.

"Monsieur will be pleased to enter," he begged. "Monsieur le Colonel takes his bath—an affair now of a few moments only."

Mark passed through the door, which the man held open, into a small, but comfortable sitting-room, furnished tastefully enough but with scant indications of luxury. Beyond were folding doors which concealed the sleeping apartment and bathroom. He threw himself into an easy-chair, refused a cigarette, and lounged there with his hands in his pockets. In a few minutes, de Fontanay, wrapped in a dressing-gown, made his appearance. The two men exchanged the usual laconic greetings of old friends.

"Rather early for a cocktail," de Fontanay observed, drawing up a chair. "What about a whisky and soda?"

"I didn't come for a drink," Mark replied. "I came for a talk, if you're not busy."

"It is my greatest compensation for living a life of comparative idleness," de Fontanay declared, "that I have always the time to welcome my friends."

"I'm not so sure about that life of idleness," Mark confided a little drily. "Anyway, that's not my business. I wanted to talk to you for a minute or two about my new job, and I wanted to ask you a question, as man to man, about Estelle Dukane."

"What do you want me to tell you about Estelle Dukane, that you have not found out for yourself?" de Fontanay demanded.

"I want to know whether I was wrong—whether I am wrong about her now," Mark confessed dejectedly.

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"Treating you badly, eh?"

"Rottenly."

De Fontanay flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"It is the French side of her which you do not understand," he explained. "But then it always comes back to the eternal doctrine which I am continually preaching to you and Henry. You take your women too seriously. You expect too much of them. You bore them with your expectations. The true Frenchwoman wants to be the partner of your pleasures, not the partner of your life. Why, you behave as though you might even expect her to take early breakfast with you."

"These after all are merely generalities," Mark pointed out, a little bitterly. "What I want to find out is whether Estelle Dukane is a typical Frenchwoman, possessing all these failings which you demonstrate so eloquently, or whether she is in any way the woman I believed her to be."

"I will compose myself to be serious," his friend promised. "I will tell you this—that I really do not know. She has at times puzzled me. I will recount to you the one thing which leads me to believe that there may be hope for you."

"Go ahead," Mark begged.

"She was in Florence last Spring with her father, and I came across them once or twice there. I remember one morning, I had wandered into the Uffizzi Gallery, or the Pitti—I do not remember which—a little earlier than the crowd, and I found her seated there. She did not see me, and I kept purposely out of sight, because, psychologically I was a little interested. She was studying one of the 'Madonnas'—I think it was

the most motherly of them all, the Raphael 'Mother and Child.' I watched her for a minute or two from the distance and I saw something in her eyes which I have never seen since and which I imagine she chooses to keep concealed. Still it was there because I saw it. Since then I have always half believed that she is not exactly the—you will forgive me—the heartless little *mondaine* she tries to appear."

"If I hadn't believed something of the sort," Mark declared earnestly, "I could never have cared for her as I do. For some reason or other, though, she shows me nothing except either the most frivolous side of herself or the most selfish."

"The caprice of her sex," de Fontanay observed. "As you have doubtless discovered there is nothing bores a woman so much as too many evidences of affection from the man whom she is only just beginning to like. The way to win the heart of a Frenchwoman is to keep her amused. There are more hearts won with witty speeches than tender ones in Paris."

"I suppose," Mark said gloomily, "you think you know the devil of a lot about women, Raoul?"

"The time has evidently arrived," his friend rejoined, "When you need the soothing influence of a cocktail. I have given you the encouragement you came to get—more than you had hoped for, I should imagine. I should think it quite probable from what I know of Estelle Dukane, that there is some part of herself which she keeps entirely in the background, but if you want my advice, don't go about your love-making in such deadly earnest. You wouldn't do yourself any harm if you dropped it altogether for a week."

There was a pleasant sound of tinkling ice in the

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background, and presently the elderly manservant made his reappearance through the folding doors, carrying the two cocktails on an old-fashioned tray. He served them with an air reminiscent of the Faubourg, left the shaker upon the table and took his leave. De Fontanay lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

"And now about your job, Mark?" he asked.

"It grows more interesting every day," Mark confessed, "and every day I realise how damnably ignorant I am. What's all this trouble about the franc, Raoul?"

De Fontanay's face darkened.

"It is trouble of a very simple, but a very venomous nature," he declared. "It is trouble caused by the fact that I think no Country in the world has more enemies, is more hated, than my own."

"I don't see why that should be," Mark reflected.

"This is the third attempt," de Fontanay went on, "to break us. Internally, our people are working as they have never worked before. They are producing more, they should be earning more, and all the time the prices mount and mount until the manufacturer who has to buy a single article of raw goods from abroad finds his profits disappear. Even the common necessities of life have almost doubled in price."

"But someone must be making money out of it," Mark ventured.

De Fontanay's eyes flashed.

"Someone is making money out of it," he acknowledged fiercely. "They are all making money out of it. The enemies of France, a secret gang of miscreants, are speculating upon every money market in the world. What do you suppose I am here in London for, Mark?"

Well, you wouldn't know. I'll tell you. We're not a nation of assassins, but war is war. This is the very foulest sort of war which is being carried on now. We found one of the Agents a few weeks ago. He'll never speculate again, for himself or anyone else. The others are clever. They work all the time through puppets, but money such as they are handling will speak in time."

"For a banker's son," Mark said thoughtfully, "I am kind of an ass at finance, but surely you've got rich men in France. I don't see why you shouldn't catch these people out. The Government——"

"We won't talk any more about this business," de Fontanay interrupted. "I am too much in the thick of it to speak discreetly. Tell me about your job."

"Mighty interesting! And it gets more interesting every day," Mark confided.

"I suppose you know why you got it?"

"Well, in the first place," Mark explained, "because Dimsdale got into trouble, and Rawlinson caught the flue, and Hugerson happened to be a pal of my father's."

De Fontanay shook his head.

"Rawlinson," he confided, "will never return to the Embassy. His career is ended."

"What, Jerry Rawlinson!" Mark exclaimed. "What's wrong with him?"

"What's wrong with the whole world of politicians and diplomats nowadays, I wonder?" de Fontanay sighed. "We've had terrible scandals in Paris the last few weeks. Part of this vicious speculation in francs has been due to sheer treachery. The thing seems to have spread everywhere though. I don't know what special sin Dimsdale committed, but

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everyone knows—your own Chief wouldn't deny it if you asked him—that Rawlinson was caught with Embassy papers on the Continent when he was supposed to be having ten days' leave at Monte Carlo. Then there was Matorni—Count Matorni—he was one of the most popular young Italians in London, but, like most Italians of good family, he hadn't a sou. He blew out his brains to escape arrest."

"I am sorry," Mark exclaimed. "I never knew Matorni, but Rawlinson—Jerry Rawlinson! I was at Harvard with him, and he very nearly got into the polo team. I always thought old Jerry was one of the best!"

"So he was in the beginning," de Fontanay agreed. "He got into the wrong set though, and London is no place for a poor man. Your Chief treated him very leniently, and I would not myself mention it if it were not bound to come out within the next few weeks."

Mark was beginning for the moment to forget his own trouble. There were new lines about de Fontanay's face. He felt somehow or other as though the life which he had hitherto taken so lightly, was after all a more serious thing, as though he had been walking about in a world whose tragic side he had completely ignored.

"Raoul," he admitted, a little humbly, "I'm afraid I'm a great ignoramus. What's it all mean? Whilst war was in the air, one was prepared for all this sort of trouble. Nowadays though, the whole work of the world seems to be for peace. Plans of battleships and fortifications and airships are all out-of-date. What is the scheming about?"

De Fontanay smiled wearily.

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"The period of war may have passed for a time," he agreed, "but another passion, as cruel and as devastating has taken its place—the passion of greed. Every Country in Europe thinks it has been robbed by the War. The great banking houses, to whom war came really as a god-send, have to find some other way to use, or rather misuse their unwieldy holdings. Just now, France is the chief victim. I don't mind confessing to you, Mark, that if I find the man who is responsible for our franc crisis, I, or any member of my Service, would consider him and treat him as a spy under the most stringent rules of war. The franc to-day is a hundred and sixty, and someone or other has used thirty million pounds to drag it there. That man, if we discover who it is, will be no safer than the man who sold the plans of Nauberge."

Mark was suddenly tense in his chair. A queer unframed suspicion seemed to have been caught up in a glint of de Fontanay's eyes, and answered. The latter held out his hand.

"Don't mention any name, Mark," he begged. "Remember, I warned you against the man from the first. It was only last night a telephone call came through from Paris——"

De Fontanay broke off in his sentence, and listened. The outer door of his little apartment had been suddenly opened and closed. There was a knocking at the inner door; not an ordinary, tentative knock of invitation, but a succession of blows, dealt on the panels as though in desperation. De Fontanay sprang to his feet, anticipating Gaston, the man-servant's slower progress, and threw open the door. Estelle stepped lightly across the threshold, the shadow of the old,

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maddening smile upon her lips, as she looked up at de Fontanay.

"Close the door quickly, please," she begged.
"There are some inquisitive people about."

Book Two

Chapter IV

It seemed to Mark, in those few seconds of agonised astonishment, as though every muscle in his body went hard and tense. His heart was pounding against his ribs. He saw the faces of the two—Estelle's and his friend's—through a red mist. Speech of any sort was impossible. Estelle, quitting the proximity of the door, suddenly recognised his presence, recognised also at the same moment the blaze of passion in his clear eyes and what it portended.

"Incorrigible!" she exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I might tell you to mind your own business," she answered coldly. "As a matter of fact you will soon know. Can you fight, you two?"

"With one another?" Mark asked, looking across at his friend.

"Idiot!" she scoffed. "To protect me."

"What from?"

"Listen. You will probably find out," she replied.

There was the sound of a heavy fall in the room above, something which might have been a muffled revolver shot. De Fontanay opened the drawer of

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his bureau, took out an automatic pistol and a box of cartridges. He handled another which he offered to Mark.

"Will you have a gun, my young friend, to deal with this mysterious menace," he enquired, "or will you rely upon your Herculean strength?"

"If there's any fighting to be done I'll fight with my fists," Mark declared. "But what does it all mean? Whom is there to fight, and what the devil is Miss Dukane doing here?"

Estelle took no notice of him. She was listening intently to the sounds of disturbance above. De Fontanay turned to her and repeated Mark's question.

"Will you pardon me, mademoiselle, if I enquire what you are doing in this building at all?"

"I will tell you—certainly. I received a telegram which was waiting for me in my room when I had finished dancing this afternoon. It was from my father in Paris. He told me to call at number eight flat in these mansions at half-past-six to-night with a certain sum of money, and to receive from a man who was passing by the name of Johnson, a roll of papers."

She was distracted by a renewal of the sounds above. They all listened. Heavy furniture was being dragged about. There were footsteps passing backwards and forwards in every direction: an angry voice, another in pain. De Fontanay's fingers tightened upon the handle of his automatic.

"Would you," he begged, "kindly warn us what we have to expect?"

"I had only just time, as Mr. Van Stratton must know," Estelle went on, "to write out a cheque for the money, jump into a taxi and drive here. I noticed

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when I entered that there was a man loitering on the pavement, watching, and another studying the names on the board in the hall below whose face I did not like. However, I was here, so I went up. The man Johnson was expecting me. There were two others with him. Johnson was a big, fat man, a foreigner of some sort. It was he who talked with me: another listened at the door. I handed him the cheque. He was like a madman. It was notes he wanted—notes. Of what use was a cheque? I explained that I had only just received the telegram. He and the third man talked for a time. At last they seemed to agree. They handed me some papers and I gave them the cheque. Just as I was leaving the bell of the flat rang. All three men were terrified. They were forced to open the door, however, for the bell kept on ringing. Two men entered, and the moment Johnson caught sight of the foremost there was a panic. He snatched up a gun but the other two pulled it away from him. Whilst they were all shouting I slipped round them, slammed the door and ran downstairs. That is exactly what happened."

"You did me the honour," de Fontanay observed, "to remember my poor abode."

She nodded.

"Considering that I saw the name on the door as I passed up the stairs it is not wonderful."

The tumult in the room above had ceased. They heard a door open and close, then the sound of descending footsteps. There was a brief conversation with someone on the stairs, after which the bell rang. De Fontanay held up his hand. No one moved. Along the little outside passage Gaston passed to answer the

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summons. They heard a peremptory voice at the door, a faint protest from Gaston. Without waiting to be announced two men, in plain clothes but with an undoubtedly official appearance, entered. The foremost of them all, a tall, broad-set man, dressed in a dark-blue serge suit, thick black overcoat and a bowler hat, stood for a moment surveying the company, his eyes travelling swiftly from one to the other, taking in apparently every detail of the room. He waved his hand a little contemptuously at de Fontanay's revolver.

"You can put that away," he directed. "We are not bandits."

De Fontanay made no movement.

"It is interesting to know what you are not," he observed, "but since you force your way into my private apartments it would perhaps be still more interesting to know what you are."

"I am Inspector Grierson of Scotland Yard," was the laconic reply. "I am acting in support of my companion who belongs to a kindred service."

"And your business here?"

"Is with that young lady," the Inspector answered, indicating Estelle.

De Fontanay unloaded his pistol, and thrust it back into the drawer.

"Proceed," he invited.

The Inspector stepped into the background. His companion, a slim, well-dressed man, evidently occupying a different station in life, took a step forward.

"Miss Dukane, I believe," he said.

"That is my name," Estelle admitted.

"You visited the flat above this evening with a view to obtaining possession of some documents for

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which you paid the sum of five thousand pounds. Your cheque will not be cashed. I must ask you for the return of the documents."

"I do not understand you," she declared, frowning. "If I choose to pay for something which Mr. Johnson has and which he sells me, what business is it of anyone else's?"

"Miss Dukane," the other replied patiently, "it is a great deal the business of other people, because the document you were purchasing from Mr. Johnson contains stolen information stolen from the Bank of England, which the Government of this Country does not propose to allow in circulation."

"If you believe that I have any such papers," Estelle protested, "I can assure you that you are mistaken."

"That is not our conviction," was the prompt rejoinder. "You paid over the cheque. It is only fair to assume that you received the *quid pro quo*. It would perhaps save time if I were to assure you that my orders are entirely definite. I must take those papers from whoever has them at any cost."

"It is necessary that you find the person first," Estelle exclaimed defiantly.

"That, I venture to think, is already accomplished. You have had no opportunity of disposing of them since you left the flat above as you were watched by the man who was posted on the stairs to prevent anyone's escape. Furthermore, as you would not have been allowed to leave the building and we have searched the whole flat above and satisfied ourselves that the papers are not there, we are forced to the conclusion that in return for your cheque for five thousand pounds they are now in your possession."

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"I know nothing of them," she asserted.

"If you persist in that attitude," her interlocutor decided, "we have no alternative but to search you."

"That is what you would not dare to do," she retorted indignantly. "If either of you venture to offer me such an insult you will regret it for the rest of your lives. My father——"

"Miss Dukane," the other interrupted, "we know very well that your father is a man of great influence. The law, however, has its necessities. We do not propose, either I or the Inspector here, to touch you. You will simply remain where you are whilst the Inspector telephones to Scotland Yard for a woman searcher."

She glared at him for a moment without speech. Once more, Mark, watching her closely, wondered at those suddenly apparent lines at her mouth. She turned to de Fontanay.

"Colonel de Fontanay," she appealed, "can they do this?"

He extended his hands regretfully.

"I fear so, mademoiselle," he admitted. "It is the fortune of war."

Mark took a step forward. He looked at the two men as though measuring his strength against theirs.

"If you will say what you wish," he began, his eyes fixed upon Estelle's——

"Do not be absurd, my friend," de Fontanay intervened. "In no reasonable Country does anyone resist the law. To do so can only result in discomfiture."

Mark's gaze remained fixed upon the girl's. She shrugged her shoulders. Then, with a little gesture of

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anger, she stood away from the table against which she had been leaning, thrust her hand into the inner pocket of her fur coat and drew out a thin roll of papers.

"You are disgusting!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, and throwing the papers upon the floor.

The man who had been questioning her stepped forward. He picked up the papers and, with the aid of an unexpected monocle, which he withdrew from his waistcoat pocket, glanced through them. Apparently satisfied, he folded them up and placed them in an inside pocket of his coat.

"Miss Dukane," he said, "the papers appear to be those of which we are in search. We have nothing more to say to you on this occasion. It is only right to warn you, however, that trafficking in stolen information of this description is a criminal offence. What steps, if any, the authorities may propose to take we do not know. You may possibly hear further from them."

The two men took their somewhat stiff departure. De Fontanay opened the first door: Gaston the second. They all three listened to the sound of their receding footsteps.

"I think," de Fontanay proposed, "after these few minutes, not altogether devoid of incident, we should fortify ourselves. Gaston, three cocktails."

Estelle, who was now seated upon the edge of the writing-table, permitted her hand to steal towards the blotting pad. Her fingers sought for a moment and returned with several sheets of closely-written paper. She slipped them down into the inner pocket of her coat.

"We will drink," she suggested, "to the unfailing sagacity of those busybodies, the police."

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Book Two

Chapter V

THERE was a moment of tense silence ; a silence possessing peculiar qualities. Almost instantaneously Estelle realised her error. She crossed with a jaunty little swing to the hearth-rug, and adjusted her hat in the mirror. Then, opening her vanity case, she powdered her nose, touched her lips with a stick, and glanced furtively towards where Mark was standing still in the same place. De Fontanay, frowning heavily, had moved a little in front of the door. Gaston made his courtly entrance. She turned around and received her cocktail.

" Ah well," she said, " I will drink to your health, dear Colonel de Fontanay, who have given me shelter, and to yours, my dear but rather gloomy Mr. Van Stratton, who will presently accompany me home, for fear I should meet with more adventures."

They emptied their glasses almost in silence. Estelle drew her fur coat closer around her.

" I am now ready, if you please," she told Mark.

De Fontanay shook his head regretfully. He was still standing directly between her and the door.

" Miss Dukane," he said, " it is unfortunate that you should have invited to share your secret two men whom honour forbids to ignore it. I am of the French Secret Service. One of my responsibilities in this Country is to discover and expose the miscreants—I call them that, although they are moneyed miscreants—who are endeavouring to obtain a strangle-hold upon the finances of my Country. My friend, Van Stratton here, has no official position in the matter, but I know that

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I can count sufficiently upon his friendship to assure you that he will not countenance in any way this buying or selling of stolen information. I regret that we can neither of us allow you to leave this room with the document which you were clever enough to conceal."

She remained with her hand holding her coat in its place, prepared for immediate departure.

"How do you propose to prevent me?" she asked insolently.

"By placing the truth before you as I have done," he replied gravely. "Those written words which you purchase to aid your father to make a few more superfluous millions have cost some man his honesty and would cost us our honour if we were to allow you to depart with them."

Her eyes blazed with cold anger. Her mouth took an ugly twist. The whole beauty of her expression was gone. She had the look of one about to burst into a diatribe of abuse. No words came, however. She restrained herself, and turned instead to Mark.

"You have developed, my friend," she said smoothly, "the most amazing gift for silence. What do you think of this foolishness? Are you, too, one with your friend? A pretty pair from whom to seek help! Do you agree with him? This talk of honour! It is an absurdity! Why, all that is done to help my father is done to help the cause of Europe. That is what you are so foolish not to understand. What he works for is to gain peace—financially and otherwise—but in order to succeed, he must have foreknowledge. The English Government have refused to give him their confidence in a certain financial matter of great import.

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It is their own fault if we have had to resort to unusual means."

She had turned now directly to Mark. De Fontanay leaned back against the wall, watching them both. His fingers toyed with his cigarette case, but there was anxiety in his eyes. When at last Mark spoke, his voice sounded unnatural, even to himself: the intonation of it somehow different. He addressed his friend.

"We don't even know what the papers are," he argued. "I don't see how we can interfere."

"Then let Mademoiselle show us," de Fontanay suggested calmly. "If we find nothing in them harmful to the interests of my Country, or to the cause of peace in Europe, then I have no more to say, and Mademoiselle is at liberty to depart."

"I don't see that it is our business," Mark reiterated, a little doggedly. "If these papers refer to any private speculation of Felix Dukane's, I don't see it's up to us to interfere."

Estelle smiled at him; perhaps the most bewildering smile he had ever received from her, and the blood began to course through his veins, his brain to clear, his purpose to become more defined.

"If she hadn't told us," he went on, "we should never have known. If we had found it out for ourselves it might have been different, but she trusted us."

"Of course I did," she assented, "I counted you both my friends. Before my father went to Paris, we knew exactly the sort of document we should receive, and the names to be mentioned in it. My father himself prepared the duplicate I carried with me. Naturally, I brought it to-night, and it served its

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purpose. Perhaps I was foolish to let anyone know of my little triumph," she concluded, "but you two, my friends, I never dreamed that you would take advantage of my confidence."

"We will not," Mark declared firmly.

"The papers," de Fontanay insisted, "must be given up."

Estelle looked from one to the other of the two men; from de Fontanay, slim, of medium height only, a slightly older man, but evidently an athlete, to Mark, a young giant, with the physique of a gladiator, the long, lean body and wonderful shoulders of a born fighting man, and there smouldered in her eyes something of the cruel joy of the woman who loves to stir the contending passions of men. Nevertheless, her tone was gentle, almost pleading.

"Colonel de Fontanay," she begged, "you hear what Mr. Van Stratton says. You two must not quarrel about this. You have made your protest. Mr. Van Stratton sees with me. He has given his word to escort me home safely. He must do it."

"See here, Raoul," Mark pleaded, "you know how it is with me. I may be prejudiced. Strictly speaking you may be right. To-morrow morning, if you like, I'll tell everyone what I've done even if I get kicked out of my job. We can't quarrel, you and I. We've been through too much together."

De Fontanay remained silent. His eyes were fixed upon his friend a little sadly.

"Mark," he said, "I wish we'd lunched somewhere else that day."

"Wishes don't help," was the momentarily bitter reply. "I may wish so myself before I get through."

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That doesn't affect this matter. You say it is dishonourable for us to let her go with the papers. I would be equally dishonoured if I broke my word and stopped her. I hate to say it, Raoul, but a scrap between you and me—well, it couldn't be thought of. Wouldn't do us a bit of good, would it? I know you have a gun there but you wouldn't use it. Miss Dukane!"

Estelle obeyed his gesture and moved towards the door. Mark left his place and came between her and de Fontanay. The eyes of the two men met at closer quarters, and his friend suddenly understood the tragedy which lay behind Mark's apparent stubbornness. With a gesture of resignation, he opened the door.

"You are right, Mark," he acknowledged. "A scrap between us would be only ridiculous. Good-night, mademoiselle. My compliments!"

He bowed so low that he apparently failed to see the fingers she offered. Mark and Estelle passed out together, down to the street and into Estelle's taxi which was still waiting. She took her place in the furthest corner and patted the seat by her side with the hand from which she had already withdrawn her glove.

"You are a dear thing!" she murmured, with a very soft light in her eyes. "I am beginning to like you very much."

Her movement towards him was in itself almost a caress. His arms went round her unchecked. It seemed to him that as her head fell back, her eyes half closed, her lips came voluntarily towards his. A fierce satisfaction throbbed through all his senses. At least she was no cheat. With what she had to offer she was willing to pay.

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Book Two

Chapter XIV

SEATED in the most comfortable chair of Mark's library, awaiting his return that evening, he found a slim, sprucely-dressed, shaven and coiffured young man, disfigured only by a neatly-arranged bandage round his head. Mark, who entered a little dazed, stared at him for a moment in surprise.

"I report myself as convalescent," the intruder observed, rising with a low bow. "The doctor gave me leave this afternoon to descend."

"Good God!" Mark exclaimed. "I had forgotten all about you."

The young man seemed hurt.

"Considering that it is only comparatively a short time ago," he observed, "that you treated me as a corpse and propped me up against a tree in Richmond Park, thereby running grave risk, your lack of memory is a little remarkable."

"I admit it," Mark assented. "To tell you the truth, things have been marching some with me lately."

"For me," Brennan confided, "there has existed, since your first visit to me, a pleasing sense of security. Since I handed that key over to you I have slept at night and felt secure by day."

"That's all right, anyhow," Mark told him. "The key is in my banker's strong-room, and can only be fetched out on your signature or mine."

"An excellent idea!" Brennan approved. "The time, however, is close at hand when some use must be made of the amazing information I have collected, or it will be too late. Would you be so kind as to tell me

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whether any rumours of a treaty between Italy and Greece have found their way into the papers and the present price of the franc ? ”

“ I’ll tell you nothing of the sort,” Mark answered a little brusquely. “ To be frank, I’m fed up with all this sort of thing, and the sooner you clear out and take your key and sell your information, whatever it is, the better I shall be satisfied. Ranching is what I was meant for, or some simple life. All this scheming and intrigue makes me sick.”

He rang the bell viciously. His companion shrugged his shoulders.

“ *Chacun à son gout*,” he murmured airily. “ For me, always, if you please, the life of intrigue. I say this, notwithstanding a pain in my head still reminiscent of Mr. Dukane’s leaden stick, and your kindly attempt to dispose of my remains in the fog. I am rather like a cat, though. I am hard to kill, and whatever intrigues may disturb Europe for the next three weeks, it is I who have the key to the situation.”

“ Well, you’ll have to look sharp if you’re going to make use of it,” Mark confided. “ To judge by the newspapers, everyone seems to be rushing into trouble on their own account.”

“ Before a fortnight my little bomb shall explode,” the other affirmed confidently. “ Either it shall explode or I will become a rich man. It is hard to make up one’s mind. This exploit of mine has been without a doubt the greatest success of my life. Greatly would I enjoy the triumph of announcing it, yet money means much in life and I am a poor man.”

“ So far,” Mark observed, taking a cocktail from the tray which Robert had just brought in, “ the possession

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of this wonderful piece of information of yours doesn't seem to have brought you much luck."

"It has brought me a smashed head," the other admitted, raising his glass and bowing, "but it has also brought me the privilege of your acquaintance. I drink to my host's very good health."

He set down his glass empty, and gazed musingly into the fire.

"From now on," he continued, "I commence to reap the reward of my exploit. I have to choose between fame and fortune. I think I shall choose fortune. I shall live in South America. It is after all the safest, and I think a very pleasant Country."

"You seem to make yourself very comfortable wherever you go," Mark ventured, as his companion accepted a replenishment of his glass.

"A soldier of fortune," Brennan acknowledged.

"Are you—er—dining in?" Mark enquired. "I mean upstairs with your nurse, or down here?"

"It will give me great pleasure to join you," was the polite reply.

"I am afraid I didn't quite mean that," Mark explained. "As a matter of fact I have to go round to the Embassy in a few minutes, and I am dining elsewhere. Don't think I am inhospitable. Stay here till you're absolutely well enough to move, but the sooner you get your key and make your deal for your information, the better I shall be pleased."

The visitor coughed.

"I will confide in you," he said, "that it is my intention to leave early to-morrow morning. I am sorry that I shall not have the honour of your company at dinner to-night. It would give me great pleasure

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to tell you of my experiences during the war. I might convert you to some interest in my profession."

"I don't imagine your experiences during the war would make very good hearing for me," Mark replied. "However, I hope Andrews will look after you. I must go and change."

Mark, on his way to his dinner engagement, called at the Embassy to report to Mr. Hugerson. He found Frances Moreland alone in the room. She was bending over her typewriter, and turned around in almost startled fashion at his entrance.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Van Stratton?" she asked. "I thought you said you weren't coming back to-day."

"I had a few minutes to spare," Mark explained, "and thought I'd just look in and see if there was anything I could do for Mr. Hugerson. Been busy?"

She looked at the little pile of papers by her side.

"Very," she answered. "Considering how quiet he is, I think Mr. Hugerson gets through more work in one afternoon than any man I ever knew."

He looked at her a little curiously. She was dressed with more care than when he had seen her last, and the extreme pallor had left her cheeks. There was a look in her eyes, however, which puzzled him. The absolute serenity which had been one of her chief characteristics seemed for the time to have deserted her.

"Still wandering around Europe?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Mr. Hugerson is an amazing man," she declared

"I don't remember anyone for whom I have ever

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worked who could have collected so much information in so short a time, and reproduced it so clearly."

"Knocking off for the night now?"

She nodded, and began to collect the loose sheets.

"I was just going to lock these up," she observed.

Mark glanced at the little pile of papers with a puzzled frown. Then he turned away.

"Well, good-night, Miss Moreland," he said. "I shall be round to-morrow morning."

"Good-night, Mr. Van Stratton." . . .

He met Myra in the hall, just come in from dancing somewhere.

"Stay and dine," she begged. "Dad's taking Mr. Hugerson to the Mansion House, and Mum and I are all alone."

He passed his arm through hers.

"Myra, dear," he confided, "if the King commanded me to dine at Buckingham Palace to-night, I should ask to be excused."

She glanced keenly into his face, and shook her head.

"That Dresden Doll!" she exclaimed in mock disgust.

Book Two

Chapter VII

SHORTLY before nine that evening, Mark arrived at Ciro's and spent a pleasant but agitated quarter of an hour ordering dinner for two. At nine o'clock he took a risk and rushed down to the bar for a cocktail. At a

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quarter-past he began to fidget. At half-past he was stalking gloomily to and fro in the circumscribed limits of the entrance hall and becoming an object of some comment. At five-and-twenty minutes to ten, a radiant vision in an opera cloak of brilliant scarlet, with a retinue of admiring attendants in her wake, Estelle arrived.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked, as she offered her fingers. "I really couldn't remember what time we said."

"Not—particularly," he replied, with a sensation of immense relief. "Anyway, you're here!"

He led the way to the corner table he had selected. It was not too near the orchestra and had the advantage of a certain isolation. Estelle looked around her and approved.

"My last few days of liberty," she sighed. "I am very angry, but for a time I must live the life of these others, and have a chaperone and go to those stupid parties one reads about every day. I like to be myself. I do not like to accept an invitation for weeks ahead and not know who is to be of the party. I bore myself when I do those things, and yet it has to be."

"What is happening?" he enquired.

"Father has taken Cruton House for three months," she confided. "We are going to establish ourselves there at once."

"That barracks!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's the largest house in London."

She nodded.

"I shall not worry myself," she declared firmly.

"We take over the whole staff of servants, a house-

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keeper, and a major-domo, and a person who acts as a sort of social secretary."

"It doesn't sound like your father at all," he remarked.

"It is not," she admitted. "He has an idea that entertaining may help him to round off one of his great schemes. For myself I am not so sure. From what I have seen of English politicians I do not think that they can be influenced by social means. Neither can the bankers."

"Still," Mark ventured, "I imagine one is a little better off by being in touch with all these people. What I'm surprised at is that your father should change his habits and methods of life so completely and so suddenly."

Estelle betrayed some curiosity in the menu, glancing it through and approving with one trifling amendment. She ate her *délices de maison* in appreciative silence. When she had finished she leaned back in her place and smiled at her companion.

"I think," she confided, "that one of my father's present schemes means more to him than anything else for which he has worked in life. It is not altogether the matter of profit, though that, of course, will be immense. You know what it is, of course?"

"I have heard that he wants to finance Prince Andropulo's Country," Mark replied.

She nodded.

"That is what it amounts to," she admitted. "It is the vastness of the proposition which attracts him, the fact that he is venturing into an entirely new field of speculation. It is just the same spirit, I suppose," she went on, watching with interest the careful addition

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of some cream into the Bortsch soup, "which appeals to me."

"I call this commercial spirit a most unnatural hobby for a girl of your age," he complained.

She laughed at him.

"There will be plenty of time for the other things afterwards," she assured him soothingly. "As a matter of fact we are getting very nearly to the end. Father has always said that when Drome is an absolutely self-supporting kingdom, he will marry me to Prince Andropulo and become Prime Minister. That is why we both take such an interest in Prince Andropulo."

"You have a fancy for being a queen?"

"The position has advantages," she confessed. "There would be no competition, you know, or anything of that sort. The only trouble is that Prince Andropulo is like most of the young men who have been baulked for a time of their royal upbringing. He has made Paris his spiritual home, and has lost all the romance of his earlier days. He knows, for instance, much more about the restaurants and cabarets of Paris than he does about the ancient cities of Drome."

"He would," Mark assented emphatically.

"A pity you don't like him," she murmured. "In some respects he is an estimable young man, and an excellent son. . . . Was I really late this evening? I could not help it. My father arrived home from Croydon half an hour before I left. He had flown over and he was very much annoyed at a message which was waiting for him. He has had to go round to see the Home Secretary. I do not dislike England," she went on meditatively, "as much as I thought I should, but

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its official classes do show a most lamentable desire to interfere with one's liberty of action."

Mark's eyes twinkled for a moment.

"Your father's ideas as to liberty of action might be considered a little broad," he ventured

"You are thinking of that poor man Brennan. Well, I suppose that was a little hasty," she admitted.

"Is it Brennan who is causing the present trouble, do you think?" Mark enquired. "I had almost forgotten about him until to-night."

She shook her head.

"The trouble is that people do not understand my father's methods," she explained. "For the purposes of his business and propaganda he has always had a bureau and enquiry agents and that sort of thing. When he wants to get into touch with anyone without committing himself he is then in a position to bring the affair about naturally. It seems that in this Country there are objections to a private establishment of that kind—'conspiracy,' they call it, or some such ugly name. Poor dad!" she sighed. "I expect he's having an uncomfortable evening, for he is so bad-tempered, and he dislikes so much interference from anybody, and as for me," she added, leaning over suddenly and patting the back of his hand, "I feel very selfish, because I amuse myself immensely here with you."

"It is a perfectly wonderful evening for me," he assured her fervently.

"Are you going to get into any trouble on my account?" she asked, looking at him for once almost gravely.

"I don't think so," he answered. "You see, after

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all, I am an American, and it isn't up to me to help the British police. The only thing I am sorry about is de Fontanay. Say, I'd like to ask you something, Miss Estelle ? ”

“ I consider,” she told him, softly, “ that if you wish to, you have earned the right to call me Estelle.”

He raised her fingers for a moment to his lips in ecstatic gratitude.

“ Estelle, then. That day when we first met at the Ritz, was it just a guess on your part that I was going to be offered a job at the Embassy.”

She shook her head.

“ I knew.”

“ Rawlinson ? ” he asked eagerly.

She assented without speech. Her admission was a shock to him. He sat in silence for several moments, his plate neglected.

“ Was Mr. Rawlinson a friend of yours ? ” she enquired. “ If so, I am sorry. You must admit, however, that he was a poor, weak sort of creature. He owed money nearly everywhere in London. One of father's agents brought him along, and I can assure you that he was not very difficult. He would have sold us every scrap of information he could get together for money enough to keep that little girl at Daly's faithful to him. We did not want anything of that sort, though. My father never meddles in politics proper. He is only interested in the little things that affect his own financial enterprises.”

“ Did you single me out,” Mark asked grimly, “ as being a likely successor to Rawlinson ? ”

She laughed heartily, raised her glass and drank to him.

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"If ever I did, I can assure you that I have given up the idea," she confessed. "I have abandoned all hopes of being able to suborn you, Mr. Mark Van Stratton."

"Mark," he corrected her.

"Very well, then, Mark," she acquiesced. "Besides, although I say little about it, you must not think that I am ungrateful. You have rendered me two very great services."

She flung down her napkin. The first bars of a familiar tune crept out into the room.

"One of ours," she murmured, rising and holding out her arms. "Come! We dance . . .!"

They moved off. Even in the midst of his moment of joy—she came so lightly into his arms—he felt his sense of humour, his growing understanding of her, irresistibly appealed to by the Frenchwoman's imperious gesture to the waiter, and the obsequious hastening of their plates on to the electric warmer which stood by their table.

There were two encores, and it was a quarter-of-an-hour later before they resumed their places and their dinners.

"Tell me what has become of Andropulo?" Mark enquired.

She shook her head indifferently.

"I have annoyed him," she confided, "and he has gone to Paris. I am not sorry. Father would like to be Prime Minister of Drome very much, but I am quite sure that I should not be really happy with Prince Andropulo."

Mark leaned a little back in his place and laughed.

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He watched the replenishment of his glass of champagne with satisfaction.

"Estelle," he said, "if I were not in love with you I should find you the most fascinating study of any woman I have ever met. Not that I know much about women, because I don't," he added, "but you are different, you know. You are so subtly ingenuous, to be paradoxical."

"I do not know what you mean," she complained. "When I want things I try to get them. That is not unusual. I do not think that I am such a hypocrite as many of the women of your Country who pretend so much affection for people and things which they do not possess. There are a few things missing in my character to which you are accustomed. Otherwise it is not at all a bad one."

"And those things that are missing?" he enquired.

"I have very little sentiment," she admitted, "and what I have is seriously affected by a somewhat troublesome sense of humour. And again I think I have some of my father's cruelty. I can be very cruel, you know."

"I can quite believe it," Mark acquiesced feelingly.

"My admirers," she went on, "always end their periods of devotion by finding me unfaithful. That I deny. I am only unfaithful to what I have seemed to be, and have not been. No women of any race in the world have ever bored so many great men into their graves with unwearying and intolerable fidelity as women of the Anglo-Saxon race. French women are not at all like that, but they do carry with them, I think—some of them—a fidelity the nature of which few people understand. It certainly does not consist in

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locking your arms around a man's neck and keeping them there until he can scarcely breathe all through his life."

"Very soon," he asserted hopefully, "I shall begin to understand a little about you."

"I shall never offer the golden key of myself to any man," she rejoined, "but I think that I give you more chances than anyone else I ever met. It rests with you rather, does it not, what use you put them to? You have a great many prejudices to overcome before you understand, and then it might not be worth while."

"You have never talked to me seriously before," he reminded her.

"I have never—I have not yet—made up my mind to take you seriously," she confided. "There are times when you please me. There are times when you irritate me beyond endurance. This evening you broke out of yourself. You did something which showed, from my point of view, greatness. You see I am grateful. That is why I offered you this afternoon in that silly taxicab, and I am offering you to-night, dear Mark, more of myself than anyone else has ever had."

"And that is why," he declared, dropping his voice to a passionate whisper, "it is to-night I know, beyond any question, that for the rest of my life you are the only woman I could ever love."

She leaned away from him, her eyes a little averted, a smile upon her lips which had in its nature something almost reminiscent. The moment had passed. Presently her head began to move once more slowly to the music. Without a word, with scarcely a glance at each other, they rose and danced.

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Dorchester wandered in at about eleven o'clock and begged for a seat at their table whilst he waited for a supper-party.

"A nice nightmare for me to face, this, at the commencement of what should be an evening of gaiety," he grumbled, as he accepted a glass of wine.

Estelle threw herself back upon the settee and laughed.

"A nightmare!" she protested. "Never have I been called such a thing."

"The nightmare is seeing you here alone with Mark," he explained gloomily.

"You do not expect us to go away, I hope," she said, "because frankly, I shall not. I think we shall probably stay very late. I am enjoying myself very much."

"You have given Mark all the opportunities," Dorchester complained. "You forget that I am a working man, toiling for my Country down at Westminster. When will you dine with me here, Miss Dukane?"

She shook her head.

"Not with you or anyone else for a long time," she sighed. "We are exchanging Bohemia for the other things. Father has taken Cruton House for three months, and as soon as we have settled there and I am installed as hostess with, I believe, one or even two chaperons, I shall certainly not be able to dine out alone with any young man."

Dorchester was frankly surprised.

"Well," he observed, "your father is probably the only man left in Europe who could take Cruton House, but I didn't know that he cared for that sort of thing."

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By the by, my sisters are supping here to-night. May I bring them over, Miss Dukane? They would like so much to meet you. We might perhaps—er—join up?" he suggested tentatively.

"I should say not," Mark pronounced with decision. Estelle shook her head sweetly.

"I shall love to meet your sisters," she said, "but we had better leave it until we are established. To-night must be considered as my last fling."

"If you have finished your champagne, old chap," Mark put in cheerfully, "I believe there are some of your party looking around for you."

Dorchester rose to his feet unwillingly.

"We move into Cruton House next Monday, unless father is in prison or exiled before then," Estelle announced. "He is in a little trouble at the moment, I believe. You must come and see me directly we are there."

"I shall be amongst your first callers," Dorchester promised. "As for you, Mark," he added, frowning at him, "you are trying our friendship very high. I am not one of those generous fellows you only come across in novels, who swallow their disappointments and shake hands with their successful rivals. If I drop in for a cocktail to-morrow evening it will be a piece of great magnanimity on my part. The worst of it is that your man Robert is the only fellow I know who can be trusted with the absinthe. *Au revoir.*"

"Almost humorous to-night, wasn't he?" Mark observed, as his friend moved off towards the door.

"Do you think," she asked, "that he likes me as much as you do?"

"I am sure that he doesn't," was the prompt reply.

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"He was half in love with Myra before you came. Besides, no one else could."

"Not even Prince Andropulo? He comes, as he tells me so often, of a passionate race. His mother confides in me three or four times a day that he would make a wonderful husband for any woman who always obeyed him and realised what a great man he really was . . . Surely I know that little brown-haired girl next to Lord Dorchester—of course, it's Myra Widdowes! Why does she look at you so sadly, Mark? Confess, have you been flirting with her?"

He shook his head.

"I don't think," he explained, as he waved his hand to Myra, "that we understand the word over in the States as you do here. Our young people are all friends together, and those who like one another best gravitate towards each other. I have carried her about since she was a baby—taught her to swim, and play golf, led the cotillon at her coming-out dance, and all that sort of thing. As to flirting—no, I've never flirted with her. I don't think I've wanted to flirt with anyone very much until now."

"Do you dare insinuate that you are only flirting with me?" she demanded, with a show of indignation.

"You can call it what you like," he answered. "What I want in plain words is to marry you—tomorrow, if possible."

"And I," she said, rising, "wish to dance. I am not a self-conscious person, but we are very much the subject of conversation at Lord Dorchester's table. I cannot make up my mind whether they like my frock or not. I am perfectly certain that Myra doesn't

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approve of my hair, and the tall lady, who is evidently chaperoning the party, is explaining that she does not consider it right for me to be here alone with you. She thinks it's going too far, even for a foreigner."

"We could put the matter right," he suggested, "by getting a special licence in the morning and dining here at night."

"An enticing prospect," she murmured, "but there is that poor father of mine. He wants a king for a son-in-law."

"He'll never get one," Mark asserted.

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet," she reminded him, leaning a little away in the dance and looking up at him so that her weight rested upon his arm.

"Make it up to-night," he begged, bending down.

"Do you realise," she confided, "that I am twenty-five years old, that I received my first proposal when I was seventeen, and that I have been all these years trying to make up my mind. I can't do it now in five minutes."

"No reason why you shouldn't do it in one," he rejoined. "Then," he added, after a glance over his shoulder and a momentary start of surprise, "I can order another bottle of champagne and invite your father to drink our healths."

"My father?" she exclaimed.

He nodded and stopped dancing. They were close to their table and a few yards away, preceded by a *maitre d'hôtel*, approached Mr. Dukane.

"This won't mean trouble for you, I hope?" Mark asked, looking down at her anxiously.

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She scoffed at the idea as she welcomed her father with a smile.

"Do not be absurd!" she remonstrated. "I can't imagine why he has come, but he must join us, of course. We will go on dancing just the same, though, and I will sit next you."

Book Two

Chapter VIII

MR. DUKANE was, for him, almost gracious. He offered no immediate explanation of his presence, but kissed his daughter's fingers, shook hands with Mark, and took the place allotted to him without comment.

"I am thinking," he announced, "of getting myself denaturalised."

"I would not," Estelle recommended. "I do not know exactly what it means but it sounds unpleasant. Order father some wine, Mr. Van Stratton. I think that someone has been worrying him."

"Every administrative department of this Country," Mr. Dukane declared, "is rotten. The rottenest of all is their police department and what they fatuously call the Home Secret Service."

"Cliquot, 1911," Mark ordered quickly. "Fresh glasses. Fruit. Mr. Dukane, you'll eat something?"

"I will," the latter assented, stretching out his hand for the menu. "I crossed in a 'plane which seemed to strike every bad pocket of air in the skies, reached Croydon an hour late, and then was practically ordered

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to Scotland Yard and from there to the Home Office. I'll take some cutlets and some fruit afterwards."

"Were they very annoying?" Estelle sympathised.

"They were so annoying," her father replied severely, "that I am seriously considering taking the course at which I hinted. I think that I will buy a Country of my own and make my own laws."

"I have been telling Mr. Van Stratton about that," Estelle observed. "The trouble of it is that I should have to marry the king, shouldn't I?"

Mr. Dukane indicated by a gesture that he was not in the mood for frivolities. He leaned across towards Mark.

"I came here to-night," he confided, "to talk with you. Where is Max Brennan?"

"He is still, to the best of my belief," Mark replied, "occupying my guest-chamber in Curzon Street. He was gracious enough to invite me to dine at home with him this evening."

"He would," Mr. Dukane grunted. "If you give him free quarters he'll live with you for the rest of his life. Is this young man to be trusted, Estelle?"

"I think so," she answered. "He did me a great service this afternoon, and he still wants to marry me."

Mr. Dukane brushed the idea aside contemptuously.

"That's nothing," he scoffed. "Lots of them who do not know you want to do that."

She leaned back in her seat with a little grimace.

"Utterly uncalled for, especially from one's own father," she protested. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Van Stratton is getting to know me very well indeed, and the more he knows me the more he wants to marry me."

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He mentioned something about a special licence and to-morrow."

"You will kindly refrain from talking nonsense for a few minutes," Mr. Dukane insisted curtly. "You have had conversations with your guest, I presume?" he added, turning to Mark.

"Very one-sided ones. I have listened to him quite a good deal."

"You know that on the occasion of his visit to me in Norfolk Street, he brought me information he wanted me to buy? Unfortunately I lost my temper and the negotiations did not proceed."

"Yes, I know that," Mark assented.

"We all make mistakes," Felix Dukane confessed. "I made one then. There was a certain taint of melodrama about his blundering upon the truth which appealed more to my sense of humour than to my brain. I realise now that I was wrong. The matter is of tremendous, of vital importance."

"He believes that himself," Mark declared. "He seems absolutely convinced that what he has to disclose will stagger the whole world."

"What's he going to do about it?" Mr. Dukane demanded.

Mark hesitated. Yet, after all, Brennan had made no secret of his intentions, had not even spoken in confidence.

"I think his idea seems rather to pay a visit to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury here," he confided.

Mr. Dukane's under lip shot out. There were wicked fires in his eyes.

"Fool! Idiot!" he exclaimed. "What would he get for that? Not one penny. He'll set the

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British Government a problem which will only embarrass them, and he'll ruin the whole of my work out of sheer and imbecile vanity."

"The matter isn't altogether clear to me, of course," Mark acknowledged, "but it seems to me that now the fellow is well enough to discuss things, the best course for you to take would be to re-open negotiations with him. I warn you, you may find him difficult. He is naturally a little prejudiced against you."

"I don't see that there's anything else to be done," Mr. Dukane admitted grudgingly. "I don't often make a mistake, but it seems I did here. Where do you say the fellow is now?"

"Still at my house, I believe. He was there when I changed."

Mr. Dukane inspected his cutlets and approved.

"If you two want to do any more dancing," he suggested, "better get on with it. I am going to ask you, sir, to take me round to Curzon Street, presently."

"You'll make it a friendly discussion," Mark begged, as he rose to his feet.

Mr. Dukane grunted assent.

"I'll handle him carefully this time," he promised.

"Estelle, I've never known your father quite so amiable," Mark observed, as they moved off into the throng.

"That's because he wants your help," she warned him.

"I'll do what I can, of course," Mark promised. "Your father must understand, though, that violence is of no use now. This chap Brennan has got his

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papers locked up where no one except he or I could get at them."

"He or you?" she repeated.

Mark nodded.

"Yes, he seems to have a sort of fancy to trust me. I suppose these chaps have to work alone a great deal. He doesn't appear to have had anyone else to turn to when he was dangerously ill."

"He never has had," she said. "He has always worked alone—generally at smaller things, though. Once he was one of my father's men. This is quite the biggest undertaking he has ever brought off."

For several minutes the dancing absorbed them and they were silent. Then he swung her dexterously out of the crush into a distant corner of the room.

"It occurs to me," he whispered, "that for the immediate present we had better avoid the neighbourhood of our table. Your father has finished his cutlets, drunk his wine, and is sitting there with an air of expectancy."

"Then it would be better if we went back," she advised him earnestly. "You see he is seldom in so good a humour with anyone. His attitude towards you to-night was positively benevolent. We must not spoil it. There will be other evenings."

"As many evenings as go to the making of a life," he answered, obeying promptly. . . .

Estelle had correctly divined the situation. Her father watched their return with satisfaction.

"I regret to break up your little party," he said, "but I should like to be taken to Brennan. I wish to see him to-night."

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"I'll take you right along there now, sir," Mark promised, calling for his bill.

They left a few minutes later, driving to Curzon Street in Mark's car, which was the first to arrive.

"Is Mr. Brennan still up?" his master enquired of Andrews, who admitted them.

"He is in the library, sir," the man answered, throwing open the door.

They all entered. Brennan was there, very much at his ease. He was seated in Mark's favourite easy-chair, his feet poised upon the tall, leather-bound fender. He was smoking what appeared to be a very excellent cigar, and a bottle of whisky, a siphon, half empty, and a tumbler in the same condition were by his side. He turned his head at once at the opening of the door and when he recognised the newcomers his hand slipped down towards the pocket of his jacket. Mark at once re-assured him.

"Nothing to fear, Brennan," he said. "Mr. Dukane has given his word as to that. This is a friendly visit."

"But I do not wish to receive a friendly visit from Mr. Dukane," Brennan protested, with visible signs of irritation. "My head is still very painful."

"The whole affair was a mistake," Mr. Dukane acknowledged. "I was too hasty. I apologise. No need to dwell upon it. You are all right now. You seem to have found pretty comfortable quarters, too. I've come to talk business."

"There was a time," Brennan reminded him, "when I came to talk business with you. I did not like my reception. Now you come to me. Why should I receive you differently? I am not a strong man like you, nor have I a young Goliath to protect me, but it

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would give me great pleasure to make your head ache."

"Come," Mr. Dukane proposed soothingly, settling himself in the easy-chair which Mark had drawn up, "let us waste no time. Your visit to Norfolk Street was an unfortunate incident. Let us obliterate the memory of it. You came to talk business with me and I was hasty. To-day I consider the matter differently."

"So do I," Brennan rejoined coldly.

"You further angered me," the great man continued, "by asking a lunatic price for your information. However, that matter I have also reconsidered. Produce your proofs. I have my cheque-book in my pocket. I will pay your price."

Brennan sat up a little in his chair. Although he had been lounging there for most of the evening, and had not changed for dinner, he still gave the impression of impeccable neatness. Even his flaxen hair was unruffled, the bandage neatly tied.

"Is your balance large?" he enquired.

"Speak of things which concern you," was the curt retort. "You asked me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I will give it to you. You can draw the money over the counter to-morrow."

Brennan looked across at Estelle, whom he had more than once, since her entrance into the room, regarded with admiration. His slim, white fingers played with his tie.

"Years ago, when I used to serve your father, Miss Dukane," he said, addressing her, "he was not so foolish a man. He knew what he wanted, and he generally got it. Now, he has made a mistake. A

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bargain which is once refused may never again present itself. What was worth two hundred and fifty thousand pounds a week ago, may be worth a million to-day."

"The value of things," Mr. Dukane pointed out, "depends upon what market there is for them. If you do not sell to me, your only other course would be to present this document to the Financial Minister at Paris, or to make a bargain with the sensational press. What good would that do to anyone? The British and French Secret Services between them might ultimately dole you out a few hundred pounds, or the newspapers a thousand or so. You would be throwing away a fortune, and probably, if you ever went near Paris again, your life."

"You forget," Brennan reminded him, "there are the bankers of the world who are implicated—the bankers of New York, of London, of Paris."

"The bankers are my business," was Mr. Dukane's impatient reply. "You know perfectly well that I stand for the money power of the world."

"That fact I realise," Brennan conceded, "and, yet I am inclined to hesitate. Where there are great money interests, there are usually others in conflict."

There was a brief silence. Mr. Dukane's under lip was once more pushed out. His heavy eyebrows were almost joining. His eyes were points of fire.

"I did ill to part with you, Brennan," he admitted. "You were irritating, but you were one of my best men."

"I was your very best," Brennan asserted, vain-gloriously. "Indeed you were wrong to part with me,

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You were wrong, when, after long hesitation, I came to you in Norfolk Street, to treat me brutally. You made your third mistake to-night, when you come here and attempt to bargain with me as if I were a creature without heart or soul, a machine for the collection of money, a poor creature to be dismissed, beaten or made use of according to your will. My secrets are my own, Felix Dukane. You can put your cheque-book away. I do not deal with you. Already I have told this generous young host of mine that I will not do so. Why does he bring you here—you and your daughter?"

"It seemed reasonable to imagine you might change your mind," Mark pointed out. "Mr. Dukane here is surely right, when he says that you have only a limited market."

Brennan sat bolt-upright in his chair with military stiffness. His strange eyes flashed. There was a little patch of angry colour in his cheeks.

"Market!" he repeated angrily. "You make the world stink with your gabble of money and markets, you people of wealth. Here am I, a poor man, and I refuse a fortune for the work of my brains; work for which I risked my life daily, work for which I changed my name half a dozen times, lived in poverty, spent my last penny, schemed under-ground and above-ground, carrying my life in my hands a dozen times a week. I won out. What I won is not to be measured up into pounds, shillings and pence. It has greater value. Shall I tell you what it means to me? Revenge! The gratification of my pride, a breath of the real spirit of living. Do not look at me as though I were a lunatic. I am sane. We may have our hobbies, even we who work as I do. My knowledge

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shall be disposed of honourably, and you, Felix Dukane, brute and would-be murderer that you are, will fail in the one really great ambition of your life. You are going to fail because I say so."

Dukane remained throughout the whole of Brennan's harangue motionless, listening, but with an almost abstracted air. When it was over he turned to Mark.

"Is this fellow out of the doctor's hands yet?" he asked.

"I believe so," Mark replied.

"And what about that sort of thing?" his questioner added, pointing to the bottle of whisky.

"He drinks moderately enough so far as I know."

Dukane rose to his feet.

"Very well," he said, "I make you a last and definite offer, Brennan. I will give you your price—two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for the result of your work, provided you don't go near the Bank of England or Paris."

"I reject your offer," was the prompt reply.

"Then," the other warned him, "you will accept my enmity. Few people have profited by it, Brennan. Is it what you choose?"

"It is what I choose."

"No use my saying a word, I suppose?" Mark intervened, strolling over from the sideboard, with a tumbler of whisky and soda in his hand.

"You are my host," Brennan replied. "I owe you every courtesy. Speak if you wish."

"Perhaps I don't know enough of this affair to butt in very successfully," Mark confessed, "but I can't see, Brennan, that you're doing anyone in the world a shadow of good by using the result of your work in

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the manner you suggest. On the contrary, you will do universal harm. If there has been any secret plotting amongst any of the nations upon this side, and you've got hold of the facts, you'll only be running the risk of disturbing all Europe by publishing them. Besides, what will you get out of it? Mr. Dukane is right enough there. A few thousands will be all you'll have to hope for. Take your information to any official quarter, and you will be in the childish position of cutting off your nose to spite your face. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds is worth having nowadays, and you are a young man still. Be a sensible fellow, and deal with Mr. Dukane."

"It is finished?" Brennan enquired courteously.

"It is all I have to say," Mark admitted.

"Mademoiselle will perhaps like to add her word," Brennan suggested, turning towards Estelle, who was seated in the background.

"There seems to be nothing left for me to say," Estelle rejoined. "The cleverest men are children sometimes, but I never came across one foolish enough to sacrifice a fortune to gratify his spite. No, I have nothing to say."

"Before we depart," Mr. Dukane asked, "would there be any objection to my using your telephone for a moment, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"Certainly not, sir," Mark replied, bringing him over a table instrument.

"I do not often speak myself," Mr. Dukane continued. "Enquire, if you please, for 150 XYZ. It is a private installation."

Mark took the instrument over. Brennan was listening with mild amusement.

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"Am I concerned in this?" he enquired. "Perhaps you would like me to leave."

"I should prefer your remaining," was the brusque reply.

"150 XYZ are on the line," Mark announced, a few moments later, passing over the receiver.

Mr. Dukane nodded and took up the instrument.

"Is that the Chief Commissioner of Police?" he enquired. . . . "Good! Sorry to trouble you so late. This is Dukane speaking. You will remember that I had an interview with you to-night on my return from Paris—you and the Home Secretary."

There was a moment's silence. Brennan was sitting a little forward in his chair. He had laid down his cigar. His eyes were blinking fast under their sandy lashes.

"Quite so," Mr. Dukane continued, after a pause. "I have nothing more to say on that subject. You may remember, however, that during the course of our conversation, you alluded to the extreme measures adopted by certain international agents in the pursuit of oddments of information. You instanced the case of an English officer in Cologne who was murdered simply because he had succeeded in obtaining the plans of a huge munition factory to be built in Russia with foreign capital. This affair, of course, is quite outside the sphere of my interests, but by the merest chance I happen to know where to put my hand upon the man——"

"Stop!" Brennan interrupted.

Felix Dukane's fingers covered the mouthpiece of the receiver. He turned his head slowly.

"I shall sell, damn you!" Brennan declared.

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Dukane resumed his conversation without change of tone.

"Forgive the interruption," he begged. "I believe I am in a position to hand you information as to the murderer of that English officer. If I am satisfied that that is the case I shall take the liberty of asking for an interview to-morrow. . . . Thank you very much. Good-night!"

He replaced the instrument and turned around.

"The banks," he observed, "open at ten. Would it be convenient if I called here in my car at that hour?"

Brennan, only the shadow of his former consequential little self, nodded.

"I shall be ready," he muttered.

Mr. Dukane rose to his feet and Mark accompanied his guests into the hall.

"Mr. Van Stratton," Felix Dukane acknowledged, "I am in your debt."

"I am glad to hear that you consider yourself so," Mark replied fervently. "I may take the liberty of reminding you of the fact at any moment."

"You've given me a darned good lunch, sir," Mark acknowledged, as he helped himself to a cigar from the box which the waiter was offering. "Some of these restaurants in London are pretty good, but at a club

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like this they seem to understand man's food better than anywhere in the world."

Mr. Hugerson roused himself from what had very nearly lapsed into a brown study.

"You're right, Mark," he acknowledged. "I sometimes think that's the worst of taking a woman out to lunch or dine. You so seldom find one with the same ideas of eating and drinking. Do you know that you're growing more like your father every day?"

"Am I, sir?"

"I was very fond of your father," Mr. Hugerson went on. "I have taken, as I daresay you know, quite a fancy to you, Mark. That is why I welcome your aid in getting through my work, that is why I hope Mr. Widdowes will be able to spare you until I have finished."

"I hope so, too, I'm sure, sir," Mark agreed, a little puzzled. "There's nothing I'd rather do."

"I think we understand one another, eh?"

"Well, I should hope so, sir."

"Then I can say what I'm going to without fear of this being too great a shock to you," Mr. Hugerson continued. "Somebody—and that somebody must either be in the Embassy itself or at the mail office—has been getting at our stuff."

For a moment or two, Mark was incapable of speech. He sat with his mouth a little open, his cigar poised between his fingers, his expression one of blank amazement.

"Say, you're not serious, Mr. Hugerson?" he gasped at last.

"I'm sorry to say that I am," was the grave reply. "Do you ever read the English newspapers?"

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"I'm afraid I don't," Mark confessed—"not regularly. I read the polo and the golf news, and I generally have a glance through *The Times* foreign intelligence, but I don't even do that regularly."

"Last week," Mr. Hugerson proceeded, "I advised Washington that a treaty between Italy and Drome, under certain conditions which I had reason to believe were contemplated, would be prejudicial to American interests. Within a few days, the Italian Premier goes out of his way in a speech he was delivering on foreign relations to allude to this very subject. He presupposed the very arguments I had advanced, and then attempted to answer them. How did he know that Washington was at that moment considering those very points? Then, there is the matter of Drome, and all these concessions. I reported, advising Washington to regard unfavourably any change in the present Government, and warned them deliberately against a return to the Monarchy. Washington has not yet had time to reply, much less take any notice of my advice, and yet the press of Drome is full of excited comment on the possibility of American intervention in their affairs. There are two instances, Mark, absolutely proving that the substance of my reports have been in some way communicated to the European agents of the various Countries in question."

Mark gripped the sides of his chair. He moistened his lips a little. His companion answered his question before he had been able to frame it.

"This isn't your worry young fellow," Mr. Hugerson said firmly. "I'd just as soon—I'd sooner suspect myself. You may reckon yourself right out of it from the start. If I didn't feel that way, we shouldn't be

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here lunching together. I should have chosen a different way of approaching you."

"Thank God!" Mark exclaimed.

"What I want from you is your help. I've got to ask you one question. It mayn't sound pleasant, but the whole subject is pretty foul. They tell me that you are on very friendly terms with the daughter of the man whom I consider one of the most dangerous persons in Europe—Felix Dukane. You don't ever discuss politics with her, even impersonally?"

"Never, upon my honour, sir," Mark declared.

Mr. Hugerson nodded benevolently.

"It sounds a crazy thing to ask anyway," he observed, "but after all, I had to remember that you were rather a newcomer at the game. Then we come to Miss Moreland."

"You know as much as I do about her, sir," Mark pointed out. "She has credentials such as I should think no other woman has ever possessed in the world. If she wanted to deal in secret information she could have made a great fortune during the war."

"Precisely," Mr. Hugerson admitted. "Your Chief has already pointed that out to me. Besides, character counts for something, and even a few weeks with a young woman like that is sufficient to give you implicit confidence in her. Anyway, there we are, Mark! Somehow or other, there's a leakage. I don't see what I can do about it. I have written one report myself by hand, and I posted it this morning. It's a bogus one, and if the trouble's at the mail, or with any messenger from the Embassy to the mail, or with any official on the boat, we shall soon know, for it is the sort of thing which would be acted upon quickly. I am going

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to hold up a few reports I am particularly anxious about, and, except for that, there's nothing I can see but to carry on as usual. It didn't seem fair not to let you know what was going on, but apart from that I don't want you to worry. Keep your eyes open. If you see anything suspicious, let's hear about it. In the meanwhile I'm for Ranelagh. You'll be looking in at Carlton House?"

"Why sure, sir," Mark replied. "I'm going back there now. I've got some Consulate information to mail with Miss Moreland's next report. I went down to see the Jugo-Slavian fellow this morning."

Mr. Hugerson nodded. He took Mark's arm as they passed down the very handsome dining-room.

"Not worth while to repeat it, Mark," he said—"but bear in mind that you're all right, and except that we may have a little trouble in Drome and Italy, there is no great harm done. See you later . . ."

Mark, still a little dazed, made his way back to Carlton House and into the little suite of rooms allotted to Mr. Hugerson. He found Miss Moreland seated in the smaller of the two apartments, typing busily. There were three piles of finished sheets on her right, on her left a neatly arranged stack of carbons. As Mark entered, her hand stole involuntarily towards the latter.

"How are you getting on, Miss Moreland?" he enquired.

"Very well, thank you," was the somewhat absent reply.

He handed her an envelope which he drew from his pocket.

"There are the particulars you require from the

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Jugo-Slavian Consul, to be attached to Mr. Hugerson's report," he announced. "Took me rather a long time to get, but the fellow kept me waiting nearly an hour."

She opened the envelope and glanced through the sheets which he handed her.

"This is all printed stuff," she remarked. "I don't suppose a copy is necessary."

"I should think not," he agreed. "It's public information, but it doesn't get to the other side. What about driving you home presently?"

She shook her head.

"You're very kind," she said, "but I have another hour-and-a-half's work, and afterwards I expect I shall be met."

She accepted a cigarette, however, and leaned back in her chair for a moment with a little gesture of weariness. He stood by her side, looking through the window across the house tops to where the grey clouds seemed to lean almost to the chimneys.

"That sounds more cheerful than going home alone in the rain," he remarked. "Does it mean that you've made it up with Mr. Sidney Howlett?"

"The result of my desperate mood last time we talked," she acquiesced. "It's a terrible experiment, isn't it? I'm going to marry him."

"The best of luck!" Mark wished her, with a heartiness in his tone which was obviously a little forced. "Say, I hope it will be all right, Miss Moreland—sure he's good enough for you, and that sort of thing?"

"He is a man," she answered, "and he wants a home; I am a woman, and I'm aching for one. I suppose that's where we shall come together and escape a good deal of friction."

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"Is it enough?" he asked gravely.

"God knows!" she replied. "As a rule, we talk too much of these things beforehand. All that is to be known, we find out afterwards."

He looked around at the neat piles of her work, glanced through several of the sheets—spotless, and without a single correction.

"Wonderful person, aren't you?" he exclaimed. "Tell me, why do you use such a lot of carbons?"

She placed them in the drawer at her side, and closed it.

"Just an idea," she replied. "Carbons are not so good as they used to be, and after all, it costs very little to keep on replacing them. I like my carbon copies to be very nearly as good as the originals."

"Well, good luck!" he repeated, as he took his leave. "Ask me to the wedding."

Mark was afflicted with a peculiar restlessness that afternoon. He called first at Curzon Street, and looked eagerly through the letters and cards which were awaiting him. Estelle had promised to telephone or write him as soon as she was free, but up till now there had been no word from her. There was nothing of interest amongst the little pile of correspondence awaiting him, so presently he made his way back to Carlton House, where he was expected to show himself for an hour or so most afternoons. He paid his respects to Mrs. Widdowes, who was entertaining a rather large assembly, talked for a time with half a dozen acquaintances, and was finally dragged into a corner by Myra.

"What a blessed relief to see a human being—and a male one!" she sighed. "Mark, I am being

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asphyxiated in an atmosphere of conventionality. Everyone asks me the same things, and I haven't seen a man since luncheon-time."

"Let's go round to Claridge's and dance for an hour," he suggested.

She rose softly to her feet, with the air of a conspirator.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Am I looking too excited? Don't say good-bye to anyone. Wait downstairs in the hall whilst I put on a hat and change my shoes. I shan't be five minutes."

She was down in almost less than that time, wrapped in most becoming furs, her pleasant freckled face alive with animation. She sank into the seat by his side with a little exclamation of pleasure. Outside in the streets there was a driving rain, a cold wind and a lowering sky, but inside the wonderfully cushioned coupé everything was luxuriously comfortable. There were few pedestrians, but a great block of vehicles in Piccadilly. They threaded their way slowly as far as Clarges Street, then shot round and reached Claridge's by skirting Berkeley Square. A few minutes later, they were dancing in the crowded lounge. They talked of indifferent things. Myra had just received an invitation to go out to Cannes, and was hesitating.

"Of course one would love to see the sun," she confessed, "and to get some tennis out of doors, but London, for all its gloom, is terribly attractive. I wonder you aren't down there, though, Mark, for the polo."

"I should have been," he told her. "I took my stables and, in fact, some of my ponies are there now, but this offer came along from your father and naturally

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I was very glad to take it. I've been idle long enough."

"To be idle gracefully," she remarked, "is an art which, as a rule, I don't think we Americans possess. An Englishman's best at it. He always seems aggrieved when he has to work."

"Henry Dorchester is an exception," Mark reminded her. "He takes to work like a duck does to water. English politics beat me, though. I've been down to the House once or twice in the evenings, and I can't see how they ever get anywhere. They talk and talk——"

He broke off suddenly. Myra, glancing over his shoulder to see the reason, found herself looking into Estelle's smiling face. She was dancing with Dorchester, and as though by design the latter whirled her away at once to the further end of the room.

"Just as I was giving the fellow a pat on the back for being a real hard worker," Mark observed gloomily, "here he is at a *Thé Dansant* and the business of the Country going on anyhow."

"But he doesn't often do it," Myra protested. "At least I've never seen him here before in the afternoons. I've invited him two or three times to parties and his replies have been most superior—'Regrets that his parliamentary duties, etc. . . .' However, I suppose he's really like all the rest of you—more or less in love with Estelle Dukane. It must be wonderful to be as beautiful as that and to be the richest young woman in Europe. Shall we stop for a moment. I'm not really tired, but there will be another fox-trot soon, and I'm dying for an orangeade."

They sat at a small round table, chatting now and

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then to passers-by and exchanging a few remarks themselves. Occasionally Mark glanced restlessly at the main exit from the dancing-room, through which presently Estelle and Dorchester appeared. Myra put out her hand and stopped the former.

"When can we come and see you at Cruton House?" she enquired. "Is it this week or next that you are moving in?"

"On Monday. Please come the first day you can after that."

"Got to go back to the House," Dorchester sighed, glancing at his watch. "I'm just taking Miss Dukane as far as the lift."

"Don't go up yet," Myra invited. "Stay with us."

Mark promptly offered her his chair, and Estelle sat down. She and Myra began to talk and Dorchester took his leave. Mark, in search of another chair, found Rangle, one of the junior attachés at the Embassy, and brought him along.

"Wait until I've finished my orangeade," Myra begged, "then I'm going to dance with Mr. Rangle. He's quite one of my best pupils, aren't you, Charlie? One thing I insist on, Mark, though: you must take me home. I'll dance with Charlie willingly, but I wouldn't trust myself to his driving on a night like this for anything."

"She is a nice girl, your friend Miss Myra," Estelle remarked, as they followed the others into the dancing-room. "Is she fond of you?"

"Of course not. I explained to you before what pals we had always been. If she has a fancy for anyone, I think it is for Dorchester. Why haven't

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you telephoned? If you wanted to dance, why didn't you let me know?"

She laughed into his face.

"Absurd! Why should I? And besides, I never thought of dancing this afternoon. Lord Dorchester brought his mother and sister to call."

"I thought you weren't receiving here," he grumbled.

"Nor are we," she assured him. "Unfortunately I descended by the lift whilst they were handing in their cards. What was one to do? We all had tea and afterwards his mother and Lady Mary went on to pay some more calls and Lord Dorchester stayed for a couple of dances."

"It sounds reasonable," he conceded, with a slight access of good-humour.

"I think," she declared, "that you are a little difficult. Do all these young women spoil you, Mr. Van Stratton, because you are big and yet dance rather well?"

"The only person I care a cent about doesn't spoil me," he rejoined with some signs of relapse into his former gloom.

She smiled.

"Then be thankful for it. To be spoilt is bad for the disposition. Where do you dine to-night?"

"Nowhere, if there's a chance of dining with you," he answered eagerly.

"Quite the correct reply," she admitted, "but to-night it would not be possible. The reason I asked is because my father wanted to know a short time ago where you were to be found."

"What can we do about it?" Mark enquired.

They were near the door and she stopped dancing.

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"I will telephone up to the rooms," she proposed. "I will tell him that you cannot go and see him now as you have a young lady to take home. I will hint, if you wish, that you are disengaged for dinner. I know that we are dining alone."

"Do," he begged.

The telephone conversation was short. They were dancing again in less than two minutes.

"You are to be here at nine o'clock," she announced. "We will probably dine upstairs in the sitting-room."

"I don't care where we dine," he answered, a little recklessly, "but I insist upon talking to your father seriously about marrying you."

"Do," she begged. "I think it might be very amusing. I should wait until after dinner, though, if you do not mind. I saw my father in a temper once. He broke nearly everything in the room and the man who angered him went to hospital for a month. Besides, I keep on telling you, I have almost made up my mind to marry Prince Andropulo as soon as he becomes King of Drome."

"Pretty rotten choice," he declared emphatically.

"My father would not agree with you. He is very anxious indeed to develop the resources of Drome, and he has a high opinion of Prince Andropulo. He says that no one has ever attempted to run the affairs of a kingdom on business lines, and he believes that he could do wonderful things."

They stopped dancing. Myra and her partner were approaching.

"You haven't a sister, by any chance, have you?" he asked.

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"You know I haven't," she replied.

"Then your father's chances of having a king for a son-in-law," he whispered, as the little party said their farewells, "amount to something less than nil."

Book Two

Chapter X

THAT night on his return to Claridge's at the appointed hour, Mark realised the truth of some of the stories current as to the difficulty of obtaining an interview with the great man of finance. Although he announced himself as having been invited to dine, he was kept waiting in the hall nearly ten minutes before a dark, bald-headed young man, who had been pointed out to him once as Mr. Dukane's private secretary, descended by the lift and introduced himself.

"You are Mr. Van Stratton?" he enquired.

"That is my name," Mark assented.

"I am Mr. Dukane's secretary. He is expecting you to dinner, I believe. Will you allow me to show you the way to his suite?"

Mark followed the young man into the lift and they ascended to the third floor in silence. A servant was handing cocktails to Mr. Dukane and Estelle as they entered the reception room.

"Mr. Van Stratton," the secretary announced.

"Glad to see you," Dukane muttered, holding out his hand: a speech which from him was a distinct effort

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at graciousness. Estelle contented herself with a little smile and nod.

"I hope I do not need to apologise," his host continued, as they passed through the drawn curtains into the room beyond, "for asking you to dine in private. I find the Press of this Country almost as bad as the Press of America in seeking interviews and chronicling the doings of anybody whom they think of the slightest public interest. Even at *Ciro's*, when you were paying your bill, the wine waiter asked me what I thought of French Rentes for a rise. This class of person is insatiable. They batten all the time on the idea that they may get a little free information."

"Then your friends, too, become troublesome sometimes, I suppose," Mark suggested—"your acquaintances, at any rate."

Felix Dukane groaned.

"Where money is concerned," he declared, as they took their places at the small round table lavishly decorated with flowers, "it is a shameless age. People whom one meets everywhere will risk a snub, will risk anything for the chance of making a little money. Why they should persist, I do not know. They say that we who have wealth over-estimate its importance. How can we help it when we see human beings in every walk of life willing to lose their self-respect for the chance of a word thrown to them like a bone."

"My manicurist confided to me to-day," Estelle said, "that she had fifty pounds saved, and if she knew exactly how to invest it so that it brought in another fifty pounds in about a month or two months' time she would be able to get married. She was terrified

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that if she kept her young man waiting too long he would choose someone else."

"Just about as sensible as the rest of them," her father grumbled. "Of course I can make any of the gilt-edged securities rise or fall if I want to, but it is very seldom worth one's while. The financial public of this Country as a rule have common sense. Now can you guess why I sent for you, Mr. Van Stratton?"

Mark was a little startled by the abrupt change in the conversation.

"I can't think of any special reason, sir," he acknowledged.

"That fellow Brennan," Mr. Dukane confided, with a ferocious light in his eyes, and something which was almost a snarl in his tone, "when I got to your rooms punctually at the time appointed—he had levanted."

"What—before you'd arrived?" Mark exclaimed.

"Before I'd arrived," was the grim response.

Mark was genuinely startled.

"I knew he'd cleared out," he acknowledged, "but I had no idea that it was before you and he had settled your little affair. I thought you had him scared stiff."

"I thought so, too. Brennan's no fool, though. He knows very well that if I informed against him I should lose my last chance of getting those papers. So he decided to call my bluff."

"And you haven't any idea where he has gone to?"

Mr. Dukane sipped his champagne, with the flavour of which he seemed satisfied.

"I had all the rat holes stopped in a couple of hours," he confided. "I had to disobey my friend the Chief Commissioner at Scotland Yard, but I couldn't afford to let this fellow disappear. I not only know where he

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is, but I know what he does from hour to hour. He is living in rooms in a little street called Rectory Row in Hampstead, and he is losing his nerve just about as rapidly as a man may. Every now and then he rings up for a taxi. As soon as it appears, there is another a little way behind, and a passer-by in the act of entering. Mr. Brennan pays his shilling or eighteen-pence and hurries back to the house. He is like a scared rabbit who dares not come out of his hole."

"Are you going to leave him there?"

The under lip shot out: a sign that Felix Dukane was confronted with a problem.

"That depends," he said curtly.

The servants entered the room with the final course of their dinner—special asparagus brought by aeroplane from the South of France. Mark permitted himself to talk with Estelle.

"Are you looking forward to your duties as hostess to half London?" he asked her.

"Without much enthusiasm," she admitted. "I am to share them, however. My godmother, the Princess Semendria, is coming to help. It is unfortunate for me because we are the same style and she always collects my admirers."

"Is it necessary for me to swear fidelity?" he enquired.

"No, I think I can count upon you," she said coolly. "I'm not at all sure about Lord Dorchester. I think he rather admires your pleasant-looking, freckled companion of this afternoon. I am beginning to believe that all these nice, earnest young men are fickle. Father, should I be allowed to marry into the British peerage?"

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"You won't be allowed to marry anyone if I can help it," was the curt reply—"certainly not an Englishman."

"What about an American?" Mark asked hopefully.

"Rubbish!" Mr. Dukane scoffed. "However, I waste breath. Serve coffee and brandy," he directed one of the servants.

Estelle lit a cigarette and pouted.

"For a young girl of a romantic disposition," she observed, "you can understand, Mr. Mark Van Stratton, that I at times find my father something of a trial. I promise you one thing, though," she added, patting his hand gently, "I am not going to be an old maid."

He looked at her for a moment through his narrowed eyes. His bushy eyebrows seemed to become more prominent, his jaw more stubborn. Watching him closely, however, Mark wondered whether something of the hardness had not for the moment left his expression.

"In six months from now," he promised, "I will talk to you about a husband. That will be time enough."

"Brute!" Estelle murmured, under her breath. "And the first day of Spring next week! Father, you are really very inconsiderate. I believe that Mr. Van Stratton would like to marry me. He's a little old-fashioned, you know, and he said something about asking you for my hand after dinner."

Mr. Dukane became absolutely menacing. He frowned heavily, and struck the table with his clenched fist.

"You irritate me when you persist in talking nonsense, Estelle," he declared.

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She sighed, and helped herself to coffee. His host turned to Mark.

“Mr. Van Stratton,” he said, a little grudgingly, “I am told that I have to thank you for your intervention on my daughter’s behalf yesterday. I meant to have alluded to the matter last night, but events moved a little too rapidly. I was upset to start with by the ridiculous interference of your Authorities, and later on that fellow Brennan played the fool with us.”

“It was not much that I was able to do, sir,” Mark observed.

“Nevertheless, you saved the situation. The papers themselves were not of such great importance as I had imagined, but it is necessary that I am kept *au courant* with the affairs of others who are operating in the same market as myself.”

“I knew nothing of the actual circumstances of the case,” Mark said. “My only anxiety was to be of service to your daughter.”

“So far,” Mr. Dukane continued, “with considerable difficulty, and by means of methods which have brought me into ill-odour with the Authorities here, I have contrived to do more for the peace of Europe than any statesman with an army and navy behind him. I see no reason why every Country in Europe which deserves it should not begin to feel the benefits of peace, and be marching forward towards prosperity. I sometimes think that I am a misunderstood man, but it is for that cause that I work—I with forces on my side as potent to-day as the armaments of the past. There is but one event which could bring disaster—if not complete disaster, at least comparative disaster

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—upon the present epoch. That is if this fellow Brennan ventures out of his hiding-place, opens his bag of poison, and drenches all Europe with its fumes."

"As bad as that?" Mark ventured.

"Absolutely," was the decisive reply. "Brennan could set back the prosperity of Europe for many years. I shall never regret sufficiently that I did not strike a little harder when the chance was there. I would kill him at this moment as I would a poisonous fly. He is a traitor to everyone he works for. He has no thought except for his own interests. He has two ideas, and two ideas only in his mind—to make as much as he can out of his accursed spying, and to be revenged on me. The present situation is in a sense ridiculous. I have tracked him down. I know where he is, but I can't strike. The police here are indifferent enough, but they have intelligence of a sort. I am watching Brennan. They are watching me and my men. They know they are my men, too. Two or three of them would be willing to take a big risk for the sake of a fortune, but unfortunately I am known to be in the background. If Brennan hadn't apparently lost his nerve, he could walk out of the house in Rectory Row to-night, and with my men on either side of him could take his taxi to Chancery Lane, use his key, and defy the lot of us. I couldn't stop him. My men couldn't stop him: they could only let me know that he had done it. So far, he doesn't seem to realise the strength of his position. He probably doesn't know that my men in their turn are being watched. At any moment, though, he may stumble upon the truth. Then there's another danger: your friend de Fontanay has a young woman over here—Mademoiselle Zona Latriche—of

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whom he sometimes makes very effectual use. She is there at the present moment with Brennan. The French are the one nation in the world likely to be violently affected by the publication of Brennan's investigations. De Fontanay, if he does not know the whole truth, is shrewd enough to divine a portion of it, and to realise this. The girl is there with Brennan, working for de Fontanay. Brennan wouldn't see me, and my men are all known. Quite naturally, he is prejudiced in your favour. I want you to go down and try what you can do with him."

Mark shook his head doubtfully.

"If I were still a free lance, sir, I wouldn't hesitate," he said. "Just now, however, I have particular reasons for not wishing to be mixed up with anything of the sort."

"*L'affaire* Brennan doesn't in any way clash with your own activities," Dukane insisted. "You are a patriotic young American. It has come to your knowledge—and I assure you on my word of honour this is the truth—that Brennan is in possession of information which, if made improper use of, might break up every effort which has been made to bring back prosperity to Europe, and involve me personally in something approaching disaster. I think, therefore, if your interest in my daughter is anything more than assumed, you are more than justified in trying to make a deal with the fellow on your own account. Pay him any reasonable sum. You needn't bring the papers to me, at any rate for the present. Keep them locked up where you will. That is all that I ask. Keep them away from the Press—especially the French Press."

Estelle leaned across the table.

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"Please help us," she begged. "It may make all the difference."

"I will see you through, if there's any trouble with your Chief," Dukane promised. "I am dining at Buckingham Palace on Monday, and he is to be of the party, and with the Prime Minister next week, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer is giving a luncheon to us on the Monday afterwards at the Ritz. They know very well that it is I who can clear this mess up, and if ever your action becomes known I will justify it."

"Please go," Estelle urged once more. "If you hurry, you may be able to come back and make your report in time to have one dance downstairs before you leave. You must do this for me."

Mark rose to his feet.

"I'll see what can be done, sir," he promised. "It must be understood, though, I am acting entirely on my own behalf. If I succeed with Brennan, I shall probably look through his papers myself, and act entirely upon my own discretion."

Dukane made a wry face.

"You're stretching a point, young man," he remarked grimly. "However, we'll let it go at that for the present. Remember, of course, that if you need money, there's no limit to your credit with me. Seven, Rectory Row, off St. John's Wood Road. My car is downstairs awaiting, and the chauffeur knows the address."

Estelle sprang up and walked as far as the door with her hand through his arm.

"This I shall not forget," she told him softly. "Good luck!"

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Book Two

Chapter XI

FROM the moment of Mark's entrance into the shabby little sitting-room—it had cost him a sovereign tip to a very dishevelled serving-maid and a somewhat heated argument with the landlady—he knew that Brennan was drunk. He felt, too, that his arrival had been opportune, for by his side on the couch, with her head gently resting upon his shoulder, sat Mademoiselle Zona Latriche. Upon the table were the remains of a meal, and two empty champagne bottles, some coffee cups, a bottle of brandy and a box of cigarettes. Brennan blinked at his unexpected visitor, for the moment bewildered. The girl's big eyes were filled with angry apprehension.

“Goliath!” Brennan exclaimed, with clumsy gravity. “Mr. Goliath! Friend of mine, Mademoiselle Zona. Sit down and have a drink.”

“Who is this gentleman?” Mademoiselle demanded, “Why is he here?”

“Friend of mine,” Brennan repeated. “All friends of mine. All want the same thing. Don't want me. I know. Good fellow this, though. Saved my life. Might have left me out in Richmond Park. Good fellow! Ring for a clean glass.”

“What do you want with Mr. Brennan?” Mademoiselle asked suspiciously. “He is not well. He should not see visitors. I am here to look after him.”

“He seems all right,” Mark said good-humouredly. “I hope I'm not butting in. I won't stay long.”

The landlady entered with a tray of glasses.

“That's right,” Brennan approved, speaking a little

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slower than usual, and with great distinctness. "Nothing more, thank you, Mrs. Harrison. We have plenty more wine in the corner. . . . So you found me out, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"Ah, that is your name," the girl murmured. "It seems that I have heard of you."

"That is my name," Mark acknowledged, "and I have also heard of you, Mademoiselle Zona Latriche."

"Good things, I trust?" she asked. "And yet, why should I care? What do you want of my friend, Mr. Brennan?"

"Well," Mark replied, "when Mr. Brennan asks me I daresay I shall be able to tell him. Just at present I am drinking his very excellent wine."

"And quite right, too," Brennan muttered. "Friend of mine, Zona, I told you that."

"He may be a friend of yours, but he wants something," the girl insisted, with a flash of her dark eyes.

Brennan laughed until his long mouth seemed like a gash in his face, and his little red eyes almost disappeared.

"Yes, he wants something. You all want something. It is amazing! Number seven, Rectory Row! Not a very wonderful address—not a very wonderful neighbourhood—and I sit here, ready, if I choose, to push my spoke into the wheels of the world. What a crash!"

"As you are in such a candid frame of mind," Mark suggested, "why not tell us all about it. Tell us what you are going to do?"

Mademoiselle lifted her head from her companion's shoulder and sat upright.

"Why should he tell you anything?" she demanded.

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"It is I who am his friend. It is I who know what he will do. You others waste your time."

Brennan sipped his wine gravely, utterly regardless of the fact that he spilt a great deal more than he drank.

"Funny place, this!" he declared. "Seven, Rectory Row! At one corner of the street—man waiting. Opposite—another man waiting. A little further away—English detective watching men who wait. Inside me—poor me!—with Mademoiselle Zona Latriche and the great Mr. Van Stratton of the American Embassy, a friend of Felix Dukane. Mademoiselle Zona I love very much, but if she thinks I do not know, she is foolish. She is paid to come here. She is paid by the Colonel de Fontanay."

"Imbecile!" she cried indignantly. "I know nothing of what you speak. If you insult me, I leave."

He suddenly caught hold of her fingers which were feeling his arm.

"Do not disturb yourself, little one," he begged. "I will set your mind at ease. I still wear the iron bracelet. As to whether you could open it if you reached it, as to whether the key is still there—ah, well, of that we will not speak. There is also Mr. Van Stratton, interested in the same matter."

"I perceive," Mark observed, "that you have no secrets from Mademoiselle."

"Indeed, why should he?" Mademoiselle murmured, her head resting once more upon her companion's shoulder. "I love him. We are one."

"That simplifies matters," Mark declared. "If you are one you would naturally like to share a large sum of money. Mine is a business visit, Brennan. You

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have something which, if you are a wise man, you will sell. I'd like to buy it—to buy it, mark you, for myself, on my own account.”

“You hear that,” the drunken man muttered, turning to his companion. “That is young America who speaks. It is not diplomacy, but it is business. He would like to buy.”

“But you would not sell,” she whispered, with her lips close to his. “You would not sell what is promised to me.”

The words seemed to arouse in Brennan one of those fits of incoherent anger, slow and unreasonable, which come with partial drunkenness.

“Promised?”

He pushed her away and regarded her severely.

“I have promised nothing,” he continued. “Because I let you come here and let you pretend to be my dearest friend, and whisper about a million francs between us—what are a million francs?—you think that all is easy. You are wrong, my Zona—wrong! I have promised nothing.”

For a moment it seemed as though Mademoiselle Zona was about to revert to type. Her eyes blazed, her mouth was like the mouth of a tigress. Even Brennan, watching her with sullen gravity, drew a little away. Then she remembered that absolute failure in her enterprise was a certainty if she yielded for one moment to the passion of mingled disgust and anger which had flamed up in her heart. Her effort at self-control was amazing. She sat quite still. Then she began to cry.

“You do not love me,” she sobbed. “All you have said is false.”

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Her inamorato showed signs of attempting some maudlin form of consolation. Mark, however, intervened.

"Look here, Brennan," he said, "you've been drinking a little too much, but after all, you're a sensible man. For what purpose did you risk your life in getting together this information? What did you do it for?"

"Power," was the prompt reply. "I did it to gain power. And I have it. I can break four of the greatest men in Europe—break them one by one. I can force a great statesman to commit suicide or see him torn to pieces by his people. It is I who have this power. I, who sit in this shabby parlour of number seven, Rectory Row, with spies and police outside and you two cajoling inside. The quarters are bad, but the wine is good."

"You have drunk quite enough of it," Mark told him bluntly. "We have talked enough, too. Let's get to business."

"Unfortunately," Brennan sighed, "I am not sober."

"You are sober enough to realise that I am offering you a million dollars, not a million francs, for the information you have to sell. You can be a rich man in any city of the world, even in America. Why not take the money and get rid of us? There may be others who will try other methods."

"You hear him?" Brennan observed, turning to Zona. "It is the new world which speaks. Sound, full of common sense! A million dollars! That is equal to thirty million francs. It seems to be that this is the person with whom I must deal."

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Again there was the flame in her eyes and for a single moment Mark expected to see her strike the man who mocked her. Instead she folded her arms round his neck and drew his head down to hers. So they stayed for several moments, whispering. Mark lit a cigarette and walked up and down the shabby little room. Its atmosphere sickened him. He was praying only for escape. Brennan appeared to have sunk into a state of comatose indecision. Mark paused upon the hearth-rug and looked down at him, frowning.

"Shall I write my cheque?" he asked.

Brennan thrust away the entwining arms and sat up.

"A gentleman," he said, speaking slowly and with great distinctness, "never attempts to do business with another gentleman except when both are perfectly sober. Am I perfectly sober?"

"Sober enough for the purpose," was the impatient rejoinder.

"That is where you are wrong, my young friend," Brennan insisted. "If I were perfectly sober I should not permit this young lady's embraces in public. I should not allow her, as I have done for the last few hours, to continually feel up and down my sleeve and make furtive attempts to open my bracelet. No, Mr. Van Stratton, I am not perfectly sober. I like you. I think, since you assure me that you are buying on your own account, you are the man with whom I shall do business, but it shall be to-morrow, not to-day. You shall hear from me. I promise you that. In the meantime, I will put your mind at ease. Until we meet, what I have I will hold. Even Mademoiselle and I will talk no more of business. We will open another bottle of wine and we will drink. Have no

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fear, Mr. Van Stratton. To-morrow I shall be sober. My respects to the little crowd outside. You may tell them, if you will, that I am not moving to-night. I am very comfortable here—plenty more wine to finish. And listen, I will be more definite. The day of the week is Tuesday. A week from to-day I will give you an appointment. You shall come and see me once more. Then you shall know whether I deal with you or not."

He began to doze. Mark, realising his impotence, moved towards the door.

Mademoiselle rose to her feet and walked by his side.

"But for you," she whispered reproachfully, "I should have had what I wanted of him by now."

"Seems to me your chance is a pretty good one as it is," Mark replied, glancing back at Brennan stretched in his chair, his mouth open, his eyes closed.

A little exclamation of disgust broke from Mademoiselle's lips.

"He is too cunning," she exclaimed. "Even if I could find the secret spring of his bracelet, I do not believe that the key is there. He has found another hiding place. If I felt sure that it was there I think that I should take any risk."

Mark shook his head.

"Better be careful," he advised her.

They stood together upon the threshold, looking out into the darkness of the wet, stormy night. They both felt the relief of the fresh air after the stuffiness of the little room. Mademoiselle Zona's fingers for a moment rested upon Mark's arm.

"The great things of the world," she reminded him as she turned away, "are not won by being careful."

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Book Three

Chapter I

THERE was perhaps some slight and unfamiliar sense of strain during those first few minutes of their next reunion, a lack of the usual heartiness in the exchange of greetings between the three friends. Both Mark and de Fontanay showed signs of the last few weeks' anxieties. Even Dorchester has lost some of his healthy colour, and there were lines of added seriousness at the corners of his mouth. It was de Fontanay, as usual, who restored the situation. As he stood sipping his cocktail he hummed very softly, almost under his breath, the little French marching air which only a few years ago had thrilled the hearts of thousands. Dorchester listened for a moment and smiled reminiscently. The old light shone in Mark's eyes.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Do you remember that morning, Raoul, when you were trying to get the remains of your Cuirassiers across the ridge to the rest camp, and Henry was using the foulest language I ever heard trying to get one of his pop guns out of a ditch——"

"And swoop you came down right in the middle of us," Dorchester interposed, "with a broken wing on your plane. We all thought you'd got it in the neck, and all you did was to take off that ghastly helmet of yours and ask for a drink."

"It was a wonderful meeting," de Fontanay reflected.

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"And so is this," Dorchester declared. "So are all our reunions. We're sticking it out all right, too. We've all been faced with incidents lately. They don't matter. There were incidents then—little jealousies—sometimes almost a misunderstanding. We lived through them."

They obeyed the summons of the *maître d'hôtel*, and moved on towards the restaurant, de Fontanay in the middle.

"My dear friends," he said, "after all, it is easy of comprehension this little cloud which at times depresses us. You see, in those days we had only one thought, one common aim. To-day, somehow, things have become different. It is harder for us, for instance, to live through the peace than the war, because however one looks at it, we three know that the Countries of Europe are becoming more and more restless under the strain of a great impoverishment, and that sooner or later evil must come of it."

"We're the guilty parties, I suppose," Mark admitted, "but after all nature is a tremendous healer. England has proved that she can't be taxed out of existence, and France is struggling along pretty gamely, with the franc at a hundred and fifty."

De Fontanay smiled a little sadly.

"Let us abandon for a time the study of our misfortunes," he suggested. "We will leave politics alone, and pass to personal affairs. How goes the deadly rivalry?"

"I have made some slight progress," Dorchester confessed, sipping his wine approvingly. "Nothing definite, though."

"Same here," Mark acknowledged. "I can't say I

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like this new move on the part of our friends of entertaining half London. It opens the field to too many runners. Henry and I will probably drop behind a bit to-night."

"Of course, we are all going?" de Fontanay enquired.

"Who isn't?" Mark rejoined gloomily. "There have been a thousand invitations issued. I called the other afternoon and found a string of automobiles the whole of the way round Berkeley Square, and cards falling like snowflakes."

"When the richest man in the world," de Fontanay observed—"a man, too, with an intriguing past and a beautiful daughter—suddenly makes up his mind to entertain in the middle of a rather dull season, why, he is likely to create something of a sensation. In Paris his progress would be slower but none the less inevitable. You know, of course, that Mademoiselle was presented at last night's Court?"

"I was there," Mark acknowledged gloomily. "I couldn't get anywhere near her, though."

"You will have to accustom yourself to that," de Fontanay warned him. "I am fortunately apart from you two in your adoration of the young lady, but I prophesy a great success for her this season. Within a week her picture will be in half the illustrated papers. She will be interviewed in the society journals, and beauty specialists will be praying for a single word about that really wonderful complexion of hers. I caution you both that you are in for an uncomfortable time. Personally, I think it serves you right."

"You're making yourself devilishly unpleasant,

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Raoul," Dorchester grumbled. "Why does it serve us right?"

"Because," de Fontanay pointed out drily, "both of you, notwithstanding the fact that you are young men of intelligence and parts, have been foolish enough to lose your heads and pledge yourselves to the pursuit of a young woman concerning whom you know nothing except that in her Dresden doll sort of fashion she is remarkably pretty. You disappoint me. Psychologically you interest me; personally you disappoint me. I still ask myself what there is about Mademoiselle Estelle Dukane to have created such havoc."

The two young men exchanged pitying glances.

"Raoul would never understand," Dorchester sighed.

"He has no enthusiasms where women are concerned," Mark pointed out. "He understands and is faithful to one type only."

The Frenchman smiled.

"It is because I understand the type which has produced Mademoiselle Estelle Dukane," he expounded, "that I marvel at your ingenuousness. Meanwhile it would be odd if for the third time in succession our little parties were to be graced by a sight of the young lady. I have my suspicions about that long table. It looks as though it were reserved for someone of importance. Victor has twice been in himself to see that everything is to his liking."

He summoned the *maître d'hôtel* and inclined his head towards the table, which was laid for twelve people almost in the middle of the room.

"For whom is that reserved?" he enquired.

"For the Right Honourable Mr. Fowler King, the

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Chancellor of the Exchequer, sir," the man replied. "He is entertaining Mr. Felix Dukane, the great millionaire, and his daughter."

De Fontanay sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"You see," he pointed out, "the shadow of the end is already drifting upon the canvas. For some reason or other, Felix Dukane has abandoned France, and meanwhile, whilst he lunches with the Chancellor of your Exchequer, Henry, the franc falls and falls and falls. What is moving behind the scenes is known to one or two people—not, alas, to us."

There was a little stir at the entrance to the restaurant; a very distinguished company were assembling upon the threshold. In advance of the party came Fowler King, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, walking with bent head by Estelle's side. Already his manner indicated a certain subservience to her charm. Mark exchanged a sympathetic glance with Dorchester.

"I don't like the fellow, myself," the latter groaned, "but the women all say that he is the most attractive man in London. Old Dukane would love to have a son-in-law who was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He could make out his budget for him."

Estelle looked across at both of them and smiled—a pleasant smile, but one which conveyed no special message to either. From the further end of the table Mr. Dukane exchanged a somewhat formal greeting with Mark.

"You don't seem to be very securely established in the old man's graces," Dorchester remarked cheerfully.

"Mr. Dukane expects a great deal from his friends," was the somewhat gloomy response.

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"So does the young lady," was de Fontanay's dry comment.

Mark flushed guiltily. It was the first time a certain incident had been referred to between them, even indirectly.

"It was a wretched situation," he ventured, "but I don't see how I could have done anything else."

"Perhaps not," was the grim reply. "In any case, your intervention was unfortunate. I am convinced that those papers, unimportant in themselves though they may have been, would have proved once and for all whether or no it is really Felix Dukane who is at the bottom of this war against our finances. One of those men had come from Milan—I found that out afterwards—and it is from Milan that so much of the selling has come."

"But what could he have to gain by trying to destroy your currency?" Mark argued uneasily.

"One never knows which side of the market Dukane is on," de Fontanay replied, "but there is always money to be made by anyone who can command enough capital to raise or depress a nation's currency. The maddening part of it is that the nation must suffer for a speculator's greed."

"This miserable war," Dorchester observed, "has done nobody any good, and made all sorts of charlatanism possible in finance. I hope to God we never have another."

De Fontanay drummed lightly upon the table-cloth with his finger-tips. In his eyes was a curious far-away light. One might fancy that he could hear in years to come the rolling of the drums on the banks of the Rhine.

"The fact of the matter is," Dorchester concluded,

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“ that for all practical purposes war to-day has become utterly illogical. The more ruthlessly you punish an enemy, the more trade you lose, and the more you deprive him of the power of paying back his debts to you. If you take his territory, the inhabitants become non-productive. They won't pay their taxes. You're worse off than you were before. Colonies may give you a source of raw supply, but otherwise, as a national asset, Colonies are worth nothing.”

The three men had finished their luncheon, and risen to their feet. Estelle had flashed a quick little smile at them, but her father was absorbed in conversation with his host. Curiously enough, as they passed out into the lounge for their coffee, the hum of conversation seemed to be suddenly abandoned, and in the deferential silence which followed they distinctly heard Dukane's gruff voice. There was an angry, almost a menacing note in his tone :

“ It seems to me sometimes,” he declared, “ that the United States is draining the world of gold, and refuses to join in any of these conferences because the one thing she would welcome in Europe is another war. I am not an alarmist, but I should like to tell you gentlemen, that, in my opinion, England, with her fetish of Free Trade, her declining—one might almost say moribund—industrial supremacy, and the huge debt which she is engaged to pay to America, would be more hopelessly bankrupt in that case than any other Country of Europe.”

“ Pleasant hearing ! ” Dorchester murmured, under his breath, as they crossed the threshold.

“ Someone,” Mark observed, “ has rubbed Dukane up the wrong way.”

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Book Three

Chapter II

MARK had spent a busy day attending to Mr. Hugerson's correspondence, which had been more voluminous and even more important than usual. It was late in the afternoon, after his Chief had taken his leave, that whilst he was resting for a few minutes and glancing restlessly through one or two of the morning newspapers, he came across an almost insignificant item of news, which for a moment brought a catch into his breath. He read the paragraph again, and rose to his feet, shocked and disturbed. All the vague suspicions which he had been trying to dismiss as ridiculous had suddenly blazed up. He felt himself face to face with a crisis almost insupportable. He read the paragraph again, folded the newspaper up, and, summoning his courage at last, passed into the inner apartment where Frances Moreland was at work. She started a little at his entrance, and her welcome obviously lacked its usual sincerity.

"I haven't seen you all day," she remarked.

"I've been working with the Chief," he announced. "He didn't want to disturb you. You're on the principal report, aren't you?"

"I'm doing the one which he thinks most important," she replied. "The account of his interview in Rome is almost verbatim, and very long."

"Is it going to take you much longer?" he enquired.

"Another hour at least."

Mark seated himself for a moment upon the edge of the table. He noticed with dismay another neat pile of carbons.

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"You're still extravagant with these copying things," he commented.

Her fingers drummed the table a little irritably.

"Why not?" she retorted. "As I told you before, I like my third copy to be as distinct as my first."

"What happens," he enquired, "when I am not here, after you've completed your two copies and pinned them up? You are not allowed to take them out of the room, I suppose?"

She shook her head.

"I send for General Acton," she confided. "He comes here, signs for them, and carries them away. I am practically a prisoner in this room until they are in his possession. The principle is quite a correct one; there is no chance then of either one of the copies being seen or tampered with."

He looked for a moment thoughtfully out of the window.

"And yet," he remarked, "there has been, as I have no doubt you have heard, a certain amount of leakage with regard to Hugerson's mission. During the last fortnight, for instance, the currency of Drome and Italy has steadily risen, and the Jugo-Slavian fallen. You and I happen to know that that is just what might reasonably happen if Mr. Hugerson's despatches had been published in the newspapers."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You can see for yourself," she pointed out, "that any leakage from this room is impossible. Mr. Hugerson, though, has been going to a great many dinner parties lately, and he has been entertained all the time by various of your Cabinet Ministers. It must have been absolutely impossible for him not to

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have discussed his travels occasionally. I imagine he has let fall a hint here and there, and that would be quite sufficient."

Mark acquiesced thoughtfully.

"I daresay that is the explanation," he admitted, preparing to depart.

"Would you do me a service?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course I would."

"Mr. Sidney Howlett is waiting for me outside. General Acton has just telephoned up that he can't get here for at least an hour, and I can't sign off until I have placed these copies of Mr. Hugerson's report in his hands. I can't even leave the room. I wonder whether you would mind just taking a note to Mr. Howlett."

"Sure!" Mark promised. "I'll be delighted. I'm leaving directly."

"Come back when you've collected your hat and overcoat. I'll have it ready by then."

Mark made his way to his room, his hands in his pockets, and a troubled frown upon his forehead. He locked up his own papers, put on his hat and coat, and presently returned to Miss Moreland's office. She handed him the note, and a small packet, neatly tied up and sealed. The copies of the report were almost ostentatiously still upon the table, a paper-weight upon each.

"If you will give this to Mr. Howlett," she said, "and tell him that I am detained, you will save him a long wait, and I shall be so much obliged."

He glanced towards the table. The little pile of carbons had disappeared. The drawer, too, which on his previous visit, had seemed half full of them, was

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empty. Frances, with an air of complete composure, was fitting another sheet of paper into her machine, obviously only waiting for his departure to recommence her work. He turned slowly away.

"All right," he promised. "I'll find the young man." . . .

He took his leave and descended to the street. Mr. Sidney Howlett was easily discoverable, strolling up and down with his hands in his overcoat pockets and the fag end of a cigarette drooping listlessly from his lips. Mark addressed him with as much cordiality as he could command.

"I've a message from Miss Moreland," he announced. "She asked me to tell you that she would be another hour or an hour and a half. Better come and have a drink at the Metropole Bar."

Howlett was at first a little surprised. Then he recognised Mark and became at once effusive.

"Right 'o!" he exclaimed. "That sounds all right to me. It's damned cold out here."

"Step in," Mark invited, leading the way to his car. "It's only a few yards, but we may as well ride."

Howlett, a little overawed, seated himself amongst the deep cushions of the Rolls-Royce. Mark swung round the Mall into Northumberland Avenue, parked his car at the side entrance to the hotel, and led the way to the Bar. He chose a secluded corner, signed to the attendant and ordered two whiskies and sodas. As soon as the man had disappeared he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out the note.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I was to give you this."

Howlett tore open the envelope unsuspectingly, read its contents through and frowned.

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“ Frances says something about a packet here,” he observed, looking up.

Mark nodded.

“ I have also a packet,” he admitted.

The young man stretched out his hand, but Mark made no further movement. At that moment the waiter served their drinks. They raised their glasses to each other in mechanical fashion. Howlett’s fingers were trembling.

“ About that packet ? ” he asked.

“ I’m going to be very frank with you, Mr. Howlett,” Mark said seriously. “ I have always had the utmost esteem and regard for Miss Moreland and it seems incredible to me that she could be guilty of any action that was not strictly honourable. At the same time I have certain reasons for entertaining a very grave suspicion as to the contents of this packet. I propose that we open it together. If it contains nothing of a compromising nature I shall owe you both my sincere apologies, which I hope you will accept. On the other hand, if we find what I have some reason to suspect may be there I shall have a proposition to make to you.”

Sidney Howlett made an attempt at bluster.

“ I can’t understand what the devil you’re talking about,” he declared. “ As a matter of fact there’s nothing in the packet worth a snap of the fingers—nothing at all.”

“ Then open it or allow me to do so,” Mark suggested.

“ I will open it when I choose,” was the angry retort.

“ It’s no concern of yours, anyway.”

Mark leaned a little over the table.

“ You know my position,” he said. “ I am an

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American. I am under no obligation to the British Secret Service, or to the British Police. Not a soul knows what I am saying to you this evening or of my suspicions. There is no reason why they should ever know. All the same I am going to act as I think well in this matter and if you decline to open the packet I shall do so myself."

"I tell you that it contains nothing of any moment, whatever," Howlett insisted.

"Very well," Mark replied coolly, as he cut the string, "in that case there is no harm in gratifying a little curiosity, is there?"

He drew out the pile of carbons, neatly arranged, a sheet of oil paper between each.

"Carbons! Old carbons!" Howlett scoffed. "That's a great find, isn't it? No use to anybody."

"So I might have thought a short time ago," Mark agreed. "Unfortunately, however, the *Post* has given the show away. There was a little paragraph there this morning pointing out how carbons could be treated with a certain preparation, and put into a printing press, and under great pressure the original impressions would be reproduced. It was a discovery made by an Italian during the war, and led to a certain amount of trouble then."

Howlett put up his hand to his suddenly damp forehead. His assurance was gone. He was obviously terrified.

"What are you going to do about it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"It was you, I suppose, who induced Miss Moreland to enter into this affair?" Mark asked.

"Of course it was," was the somewhat sullen

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response. "The stuff isn't worth much, anyway. It will all be published as soon as this chap Hugerson gets back to Washington."

"Nevertheless," Mark observed drily, "there are circumstances, especially connected with the money market, when a little previous information is a wonderful thing. How much were you going to receive for these carbons?"

"Five thousand pounds," the young man groaned.

"Very well," Mark continued, "if I keep the transaction a secret are you content to accept the five thousand pounds from me in exchange for the carbons, instead of from your other client?"

Howlett's confidence was slowly commencing to reassert itself. He sat up and stared across at his companion.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "Sell them to you instead? What do you want with them?"

"That's my affair," was the curt reply. "It doesn't matter to you whom you deal with, does it? You can have the cheque now."

Howlett tugged nervously at his little moustache. He was perplexed but eager.

"It's a deal," he assented. "We'll call it a deal."

Mark signed to the waiter to replenish their glasses, moved across to a writing-table at the further end of the room and returned with a cheque payable to Sidney Howlett for five thousand pounds.

"I've left it open, as you see," he pointed out. "You can get the money for it to-morrow morning. Now I am going to ask you a question. How are you going to divide up with Miss Moreland. What is her interest to be?"

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The young man hesitated. The cheque was safely bestowed in his waistcoat pocket.

'We're probably going to get married some time—Miss Moreland and I,' he confided.

"Probably is a little vague," Mark objected. "I happen to know that the reason Miss Moreland has departed from her principles to this extent is so that you may have the money to start life together. She has paid the price and there must be no disappointment. You understand?"

"I shall keep my word, if that's what you mean," the young man muttered.

"I shall see that you keep it," Mark assured him significantly. "The carbons will remain in my possession until after you have been married. Let's see, it takes three weeks in England, doesn't it? Say a month then. A month from to-day I shall destroy the carbons and attend your wedding."

"You seem to take a great interest in Miss Moreland," Howlett remarked curiously. "How long have you known her?"

"A very short time, but long enough to respect and like her as I might my own sister. I think you are a very lucky person, Mr. Howlett."

"Supposing she doesn't wish to be married so soon?"

"I think you will find there will be no difficulty about that."

The drinks were brought and disposed of almost in silence. Afterwards Mark rose to his feet.

"Not a word to Miss Moreland, mind," he enjoined. "So far as she knows the deal has been carried out. As soon as you are married and the honeymoon is over you can tell her the truth."

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‘I wish I could understand what your game is,’ Howlett observed suspiciously. “It beats me altogether. Five thousand pounds is a nice bit of money to chuck away on those carbons, when you don’t mean to make any use of them.”

Mark was busy putting on his coat. Then he drew on his gloves deliberately.

“There are some things in life,” he said, as he turned away, “which I do not think that you could ever understand.”

Book Three

Chapter III

A MOMENT of good fortune befell Mark that evening as he made his way, one of a swaying multitude, through the great reception rooms of Cruton House. He was stopped by a polo acquaintance on the fringe of a little group of minor royalties, and a moment later Estelle herself was by his side. An unexpected divergence of the crowd and an adroit movement of Mark’s left them almost alone.

“Well,” she asked, “enjoying yourself?”

“Not much until this moment,” he admitted. “It sounds ungracious, but it is at least truthful. There are too many people here.”

She glanced down the rooms—a vista of countless heads, bejewelled and coroneted, men in uniform and court dress, of couples swaying to the music beyond, of a packed concert room in the distance.

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"London is a very friendly city," she murmured. "Have you seen my father?"

"I expect to pay him a visit to-morrow morning," Mark replied. "I have heard from Brennan. I had a note from him just before I came out."

There was a general movement of the people to hear a great singer. Estelle drew her companion towards a little recess, now almost untenanted, and motioned to a footman.

"Serve us with some champagne," she directed. "Tell me at once about Brennan."

"He seems to have kept his word. He promised, as I told you, that he would send for me when he was ready to deal. I am to be at the Milan Court at half-past-twelve to-night."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"You must succeed," she begged earnestly. "That woman is still with him, I hear, and your friend, the Marquis de Fontanay, would give his soul for those papers. You must secure them. Do you hear—Mark? You must get them from him."

"I certainly will," Mark declared confidently. "He must mean business or he wouldn't have kept his word and sent for me. Besides, although the girl is a danger, of course, I don't think he likes de Fontanay. I'd back my chance against Raoul's anyway."

"A man of that type has no feelings of friendship," she asserted earnestly. "He is just a cold-blooded automaton, working for his own advantage."

"If he were that," Mark observed, "he would scarcely be so obstinate in refusing to deal with your father."

"My father made one of the few mistakes of his life

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in quarrelling with him," she confessed. "Furthermore, there has always been bad blood between them. We shall have to rely upon you."

She looked suddenly into his eyes, and he was conscious of a curious relaxation of her occasionally almost aloof demeanour. Her smile seemed to have a more subtle meaning, her eyes a gentler softness. Even her body as she leaned a little towards him, seemed to bespeak a new and very desirable graciousness. She was herself again as she had been before for a few short hours.

"You must not fail," she whispered. "I cannot tell you how much it means to us. I know that most people would tell you to-day that my father was one of the richest men in the world. Perhaps on paper he is. Nevertheless, it is in Brennan's power to ruin the greatest scheme in which he has ever indulged, a scheme in which he has invested countless millions, a scheme the failure of which might mean ruin."

"Ruin!" Mark repeated. "It is incredible."

"The incredible is sometimes possible," she murmured.

And then the drama of it all seemed to sweep in upon him suddenly and he realised with almost miraculous intensity the haunting anxiety which during the last few months had carved deeper lines in Felix Dukane's worn face. From where they sat, retired though the spot was, he could indulge in a panoramic view of those perhaps the most wonderful reception rooms in the world. In every direction were moving a constant throng of men and women; men in uniform and court dress, women in tiaras, coronets and flashing jewels, in marvellous toilettes, beautiful with

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the adornment of art or nature, or both, and in the background the music, the softly-played music, of the new dance. A thousand lights appeared to flash from the chandeliers which were the glory of the great house. It was like a scene from some modern Arabian Nights, the epitome of all that was delightful and beautiful in the modern world. And curiously enough, just at that moment there appeared, upon the threshold of one of the further rooms, the giver of the feast himself—Dukane, stolid, not without a certain dignity, and by his side a familiar figure of royalty.

“Ruin!” Mark repeated once more. “Such a thing seems absurd.”

Estelle had become curiously and wonderfully human. A certain indifference amounting almost to hardness, which had at times repelled him, at times sapped his courage, seemed to have passed from her personality. She was very beautiful, the light in her eyes had softened, her mouth had lost its doubtful lines, and acquired a new tenderness.

“It is hard to explain,” she murmured, “and although I wish to treat you with confidence, dear Mark, I would rather not try just now. I would rather you took my word for it. Will you, please? Mark, you must succeed to-night.”

She suddenly took his hand. He leaned down, and looked passionately into her eyes.

“Estelle,” he promised, “I will buy Brennan’s silence, if I have to shake the breath out of his body to do so.” . . .

A few yards away, Raoul de Fontanay passed, talking earnestly to the Ambassador of his Country. Estelle drew her hand from Mark’s.

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"Be careful," she whispered. "That is the one person I fear."

De Fontanay paused, whispered a word to his companion and turning abruptly, came towards the two. He bowed very low before Estelle.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I have had the honour of paying my respects to your joint chaperones, the Princess Semendria, and the Duchess of Croome, but I have not yet had the pleasure of paying my respects to you—my hostess."

She smiled as she gave him her fingers.

"We have had to divide ourselves almost into detachments," she explained. "The Duchess was kind enough to look after some of the English people whom we scarcely knew, my godmother helped to receive our European friends, and I just came in where I was wanted. As you see, I am now neglecting my duties shamefully."

"I will not say that I envy Van Stratton, because he is my friend," de Fontanay remarked, "but he is at least fortunate. Have you heard the rumours which are being passed around to-night?"

"I have heard nothing," she replied.

"What sort of rumours, Raoul?" Mark enquired.

"They say," de Fontanay went on, speaking with a certain lightness, but with his eyes fixed upon Estelle, "that an application has been made to the League of Nations by one of the signatories, insisting upon an immediate meeting."

"On what grounds?" Estelle enquired.

"The Country in question," de Fontanay continued, "claims to have discovered the existence of a secret treaty between two neighbouring states. There are

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no particulars, of course : the rumour itself may be a canard. On the other hand, I notice that the Foreign Secretary has just left in a hurry."

Estelle yawned.

"Well," she said, "I hope that, whatever happens, these stupid Countries will keep their quarrels to themselves . . . Shall we have one more short dance, Mr. Van Stratton? After that, I must return to my duties."

De Fontanay bowed and passed on. For a moment Estelle's fingers rested heavily upon Mark's arm.

"Perhaps," she predicted anxiously, "Brennan's message is only to tell you that he has already sold himself. There was something a little sinister about Colonel de Fontanay."

Mark shook his head.

"I think not," he answered. "I don't believe de Fontanay would have mentioned the matter at all if he had really known anything. He was watching you closely all the time. I think he was just trying to find out whether you were nervous or confident. I will buy Brennan for you, Estelle."

They danced amongst the palms, lost units in a swaying crowd, danced to the fashionable music of the moment, until Mark, in a sudden fit of exaltation, gathered his partner lightly but firmly into his arms, and sought the more secluded places.

"If I succeed," he whispered, "you will never be a queen."

"If you succeed," she rejoined, "I hope the man whom I marry will never believe that I am not."

Her arms pressed his gently for a moment. He forced her eyes to look into his.

"I'll go there now, Estelle," he promised.

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The absence of that faint tinge of mockery left her smile entirely tender.

"Even for that," she begged, "not until the music stops."

Book Three

Chapter IV

MARK, admitted to the sitting-room at the Milan Court by a very changed Mademoiselle Zona—Mademoiselle in an evening gown and hat of Parisian design, a string of pearls around her neck and her hair coiffured in the latest fashion—came to an abrupt pause as soon as he had crossed the threshold. Brennan himself carefully dressed in evening clothes, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, welcomed him with a cordial wave of the hand—but Brennan was not alone. Raoul de Fontanay who had apparently just divested himself of his coat and hat was seated in the opposite easy-chair.

"A little more confidence on your part," the latter remarked, "and we might have shared a taxi."

"Why couldn't I say the same about you?" Mark retorted, accepting the chair to which Brennan had pointed.

"It was not for me," de Fontanay observed, with obvious intent, "to interrupt your very delightful flirtation with Estelle Dukane."

Brennan made a grimace. He turned a frowning face upon Mark.

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"You are still intimate with that household?" he demanded.

"With Felix Dukane I have very little to do," Mark replied. "He hasn't much use for me or I for him. I do not see how my friendship with his daughter is anyone's concern except my own."

Brennan nodded judicially.

"You are perhaps right," he admitted. "In any case, I think we can now proceed towards the discussion of that little matter of business which has brought us together."

"In whose interests, may I ask," Raoul de Fontanay enquired softly, "does Mr. Van Stratton intervene?"

"An apt question," Brennan admitted. "Yes, a very apt question, because it leads to something which I have to say. Will you answer Colonel de Fontanay, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I am here prepared to bid for what Mr. Brennan has to sell on my own account, and in my own interests," Mark asserted.

"An incredible statement!" de Fontanay expostulated, throwing his cigarette into the fire. "Of what possible use could Brennan's information be to you?"

"That is my business," was the curt rejoinder. "I have the money to spend, and I am willing to deal with him."

"I suggest," de Fontanay continued, turning to Brennan, "that you ask Mr. Van Stratton this plain question: is he here on behalf of Felix Dukane, or on his own account?"

"You anticipate my own intention," Brennan agreed. "I ask you that question, Mr. Van Stratton, in all

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earnestness. I will not deal with Mr. Dukane or any agent of his."

De Fontanay took a fresh cigarette from his case, lit it, and leaned back in his chair. He was watching Mark closely. Mademoiselle, seated at the table in the centre of the room, listened eagerly to every word, her expression tense, almost strained.

"You need not have the slightest fear," Mark declared, with perfect coolness. "I am not pledged in any way to Felix Dukane, and I shall use my own judgment entirely as to what I do with Brennan's secrets, supposing I decide to buy them."

Brennan nodded approvingly. Mademoiselle's eyes flashed.

"But you came first," she persisted, "upon Felix Dukane's account. You admitted it."

"That is quite true," Mark acknowledged. "It is also quite true that under ordinary circumstances I might have passed them on to Felix Dukane, but if Mr. Brennan is inclined to make it a condition of their sale that I do not do so, I accept it. I'll make a lone deal."

"Men have sometimes broken their word of honour for a woman's sake," Mademoiselle declared, with a flickering sob of passion in her tone.

"A man," Mark retorted, "would not have made that speech to me with impunity."

Brennan tapped lightly with a finger upon the table.

"We waste time," he said. "What I am proposing is a little auction sale at which you two are the bidders. Colonel de Fontanay, through his Secret Service agents—to several of whom I take off my hat in deep respect—knows fairly well the nature of the information I have

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to offer. You, my late host, and young friend, Mr. Van Stratton, probably convince yourself as to the value of my merchandise through the attitude of Felix Dukane. This I say to you," he went on, with a vainglorious little twirl of his moustache, "by way of justification. In the course of my career I have been a naturalised Frenchman, a naturalised Austrian, a naturalised Englishman. I was born, as a matter of fact, in Asia Minor, and my grandfather was an Armenian. Of definite nationality or of patriotism, its fruit, I possess none at all. All the Countries of Europe, or the world, are as one to me. I sell the fruit of my labours, that one unparalleled feat in the history of any Secret Service, to the highest bidder. One exception there has been, and one only—I would not sell to Felix Dukane or to the Statesman who has become his tool. That is why I have asked our young American friend on whose account he is a bidder. I am satisfied with his reply. And one further condition I make. It is, you would say, a tribute to my vanity. Never mind. The contents of that box have cost the lives of several of my associates, and that I myself escaped from a certain Country alive is a veritable miracle. I offer you here the result of the greatest feat which the art of espionage has ever accomplished. I demand to be present when the despatches are opened, that I may read my triumph in the face of their purchaser."

"I agree," de Fontanay assented.

"And I," Mark echoed.

De Fontanay leaned forward in his chair.

"Brennan," he said, "I do not know to what extent my friend Mark Van Stratton is prepared to go in this

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matter, but it is very certain that the sum which either of us is prepared to pay is sufficient to keep you in luxury for the rest of your life. I claim that France has the greater right to the fruits of your labour. If you sell elsewhere, you become a participant, an aider and abettor in a nefarious plot against her."

Brennan's smile was almost contemptuous.

"The suggestion makes no appeal to me," he acknowledged. "One who has led my life has out-lived conscience. For the last year, I have stood every day on the threshold of death. Yet, with that atmosphere around me, I discovered in due course the details of that amazing situation, the possibility of which my own genius and imagination had constructed. This is no idle boast of mine. I swear to you that whoever purchases the key which I shall presently offer, and opens my box, will receive the sensation of his life. I shall sell to the highest bidder. Kindly make all your offers in pounds sterling."

"I shall offer you," Mark proposed, "fifty thousand pounds."

Brennan sighed gently.

"In these days," he murmured, "the interest on fifty thousand pounds, living say in South America, would only supply one with a pitifully inadequate income, even supposing I were unable to succeed in the desire of my life and persuade Mademoiselle Zona to accompany me. Mademoiselle Zona is charming, but she has the Frenchwoman's gift for spending money. The offer is one which is scarcely worthy of you, my dear Mr. Van Stratton."

"I propose to double it," de Fontanay announced.

"The proceedings," Brennan admitted, "commence

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to be interesting. Dear Zona, if one might trouble you, the wires are already cut—permit me.”

He reached towards the sideboard and detached the strings from a bottle of champagne. Zona filled the glasses and carried them round. Brennan looked on with a smile.

“That is very good,” he said. “We continue this little affair on a friendly basis. So far what has happened may be treated as a joke. Shall I prepare myself for a serious bid?”

“Would it be possible,” de Fontanay enquired, “for me to have a few words in private with Mr. Van Stratton?”

Brennan’s gesture of refusal was uncompromising.

“Certainly not,” he replied. “You are my only two bidders. Is it likely that I should permit you to come to an understanding. Afterwards what arrangement you two may make does not concern me. I shall probably be on my way to a new Country, and, I trust,” he added, with a little smile at Zona, “to a happier life.”

“In that case,” de Fontanay said, “I shall make you at once my final bid—the whole extent of the resources which I can command. I offer you for your papers two hundred thousand pounds.”

“A quarter of a million,” Mark proposed.

Brennan beamed upon them both.

“Capital,” he exclaimed. “The affair becomes of interest. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds is not a great fortune as things are to-day, but it is a sum not to be despised. We have not heard the last from you, I trust, Monsieur le Colonel?”

De Fontanay rose suddenly to his feet and rested his hand upon Mark’s shoulder.

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"I have no money with which to increase my bid, but, Mark, listen to me. This is not an affair of millions. Can you not see that for yourself? Is it right of you to use your wealth in an evil cause. You are assisting towards a great tragedy if you buy those papers. It is not fair to France, it is not fair to civilisation. Even if you do not hand them over to him, you are acting on Dukane's instigation. You know what will happen. You will be Dukane's puppet; you will keep silent at his behest. This damned ring will continue their conspiracy against France, and God knows what may be behind it all. You are acting for a man who is nothing but a great bloated octopus of wealth, a man without ideals or conscience."

Brennan tapped the table with his pencil.

"Really, gentlemen," he protested, "this seems to me beside the point. Mr. Van Stratton has offered me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for the key of the box in which my papers repose. If you have no further bid to make, Monsieur le Colonel, let us consider these proceedings at an end."

De Fontanay's grip upon his friend's shoulder tightened. His face was very white.

"I think I know the truth, Mark," he sighed. "You would put your infatuation for that girl before your sense of justice, your sense of honour."

"I am sorry, Raoul," Mark replied. "I don't see why you need assume that I'm in this only on her account, but if I were I wouldn't be the first man who forgot everything else in life for a woman's sake. Now I'm going to write my cheque."

De Fontanay released his friend's arm as though his fingers had been stung. He crossed the room and

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whispered in Zona's ear. She leaned over and spoke to Brennan. He shook his head coldly.

"My friends," he announced, "I have no wish to interfere in that little argument which undoubtedly has its interest to both of you, but the time has, I think, arrived for us to conclude this matter. If you have no further bid to make, Colonel de Fontanay, I shall give up my key to Mr. Van Stratton in return for his cheque for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"I can make no further bid," de Fontanay admitted. "My funds are exhausted."

"In what manner, may I ask," Brennan enquired, "do you propose to hand over this somewhat large sum, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I can give you a cheque on the Bank of England for one hundred thousand pounds," Mark replied, "and a sight draft on New York which you can clear by cable for the balance."

"I accept your proposal," Brennan agreed.

He offered his place to Mark, who made out the cheque. In the meanwhile, Brennan spoke through the telephone to the office, and gave a few instructions. In a moment or two a clerk from below, attended by a commissionaire, arrived. They handed a little packet to Brennan, who signed for it, and waved them away, with a word of thanks. On their departure, he broke the heavy seal, and withdrew the key from the wooden box.

"This has been in your possession once before," he reminded Mark. "You know where and how to use it. Let me refill your glasses. A very pleasant transaction!—Monsieur le Colonel, I regret that you are a loser in this little deal, but I congratulate my friend

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Mr. Van Stratton on his enterprise. A quarter of a million pounds may seem to you a great deal of money, but there are many ways in which he can recoup himself within a few hours of the opening of the box. And if you think," he continued, with an amiable smile, "that I myself have reaped too large a reward, let me remind you of this: there wasn't a day after I left Paris last, when I wasn't expecting every moment a hand upon my shoulder. I could have been trapped very easily, especially during the last twenty-four hours. You two think, I suppose, that it needs no courage to do work in the bureau of a statesman under a false name, seeking for proofs of his treachery. You are wrong. I am not sure that it is not the highest form of bravery which keeps you with no uplifting thrill of excitement, apparently plodding along with a hundred others, yet knowing that the slightest slip, the slightest ill-chance, and the telephone would ring, and first a great policeman, and then a squad of soldiers—and the end, within a few minutes. Believe me, Mr. Van Stratton, I have earned your two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. . . . You won't finish the bottle, gentlemen? There is another upon the sideboard."

They bade him a somewhat curt farewell. Zona, who had been seated in a corner, her face buried in her hands, rose also to her feet. She looked towards de Fontanay. He shook his head, and she subsided into her place.

"Will you give me a lift home, Mark?" de Fontanay asked.

Mark hesitated for a moment.

"Why not?" he assented. "I was wondering whether it was too late to go back to Cruton House."

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"And announce the success of your exploit," his friend observed bitterly. "Well, if you do that, you can still drop me on the way."

Book Three

Chapter V

MARK was aware of a curious sense of uneasiness as he reclined a quarter of an hour later in de Fontanay's most comfortable arm-chair and watched his host mixing the drinks at the sideboard. There was something fantastic about their recent duel; a touch of the sinister about the insistent invitation which had induced him to mount the stairs. Yet, when de Fontanay returned and sank wearily into the opposite chair, Mark could feel nothing but shame for the half-born thoughts in his mind.

"I suppose you will not refuse to answer one question?" the former asked gravely, as he lit a cigarette. "Whether you were honest in your attitude or not, you still bought those papers at Dukane's instigation?"

"It was from Dukane I first heard of them, naturally," Mark replied. "It is entirely his estimate of their value which I have accepted."

"You have bought, as they say in England, a pig in a poke," de Fontanay observed.

"I suppose I have been more or less of a fool," Mark acknowledged doggedly. "I went into it at first more or less as Dukane's agent, from the financial point of view. Now I have promised not to deal with him, it

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Seems to me I am likely to be much out of pocket. Still, a million dollars won't break me, and I shall have kept my word."

"There will, I am convinced," de Fontanay declared bitterly, "be a special hell somewhere in the future for those who have more money than they know what to do with, and blunder into great affairs."

"I don't want to seem offensive, Raoul," Mark rejoined, after a moment's hesitation, "but it does seem to me that some of you French people are a trifle crazy nowadays. You look at everything that happens from one point of view, and one point of view only—from that of France. No one wants to destroy France, Raoul—not even her bitterest enemy. This financial campaign against her she has in a sense brought upon herself by her own curious methods in dealing with her resources. It isn't going to ruin her, or anything like it. If you would tax your people properly, enforce the taxation and insist upon your people making some of the sacrifices they shirk, no one in the world would play havoc with your currency. The fact of it is you got a trifle hysterical during the War—heavens knows I don't blame you—and you've never got over it."

De Fontanay's face had hardened, and all its lines seemed to have suddenly become deeper. His tone was almost menacing.

"These generalities from you, Mark," he said, "are childish. The fact remains that you have used your wealth to-night to prevent my carrying out the instructions of my Government, which were to obtain Brennan's information at any reasonable cost. Your interest in the whole affair, however you may argue

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and try to deceive even yourself, is a profoundly selfish one. Therefore, although we are friends who have looked at death together, although it is true that you saved my life, I must tell you that all personal sentiments in these few minutes fade away. I am forced to see in you only the enemy of my Country."

Mark stiffened a little in all his limbs. His hand crept down to his pocket. He had a curious sense of being no longer alone with de Fontanay. He looked searchingly around. The windows and door were closed, but the curtains leading to the bed-chamber had trembled.

"You threaten me, Raoul?" he asked, incredulously.

"I must have that key," was the firm reply. "It is not I, Mark, who needs it. It is France."

"And if I refuse, as I shall do?"

"Think for a moment," de Fontanay pleaded. "You outbid me because of your wealth. I was driven to argue with you. I was driven to rely upon your friendship, upon my belief in your sense of honour. Again I was disappointed. I am driven now to the last and most terrible expedient. You may not leave this room, Mark, unless you part with the key."

"Is it you and I alone?" Mark demanded.

De Fontanay shook his head.

"It is so I should have preferred it," he answered, "but again I have not myself to think of. I dishonour friendship for the sake of my Country."

The words sounded strangely on Mark's ears. For the second time within the last few minutes he was conscious of a curious buzzing in his ears, a sensation of intense and unnatural sleepiness. He tried to rise

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from his seat and staggered back again. All the time de Fontanay was looking at him sadly.

"Damn you, Raoul!" he faltered. "I'd rather—have fought."

"I had to choose the safest means," de Fontanay replied, as he watched his friend collapse.

Mark returned to consciousness slowly, a feeling of languor in his limbs and a confused sense of unreal noises still echoing in his brain. He sat up gradually and looked about him. His coat and collar had been removed and were lying upon the table by his side together with a small heap of his personal belongings. At the further end of the room, Raoul himself, a Colonel Jacques de Fayenne, whom Mark knew as his assistant, and a third man, a stranger, were talking in low tones. By degrees it became apparent that de Fayenne was urging a course upon Raoul to which the latter objected.

"You have run this risk for nothing, then!" de Fayenne exclaimed excitedly. "We are to be fooled by this ignorant young American—you and I, de Fontanay, heads of the French Secret Service. There is little that he can have done with the key. He must be made to tell where it is—made to before he regains his strength."

De Fontanay shook his head.

"He will never tell," he said. "He is a brave man and my friend. I have gone far enough."

Their voices dropped to a whisper. Mark sat up and examined the contents of his pockets which were scattered upon the table.

Slowly he picked up his collar and fastened it round

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his neck, arranged his tie, rose to his feet and put on his coat. The three men, suddenly aware of his recovery, broke off in their conversation. De Fontanay came across the room and stood before his friend.

"Well?"

Mark was quietly stowing away his belongings in his pocket. He made no answer for a moment.

"Feeling queer?" de Fontanay continued.

"Like the morning after an almighty jag," Mark replied in a colourless tone. "Can I go?"

De Fayenne stood up. He was a tall, lean-faced man, who had lost one arm in the war, but had won many decorations and honours.

"Not yet," he answered sharply.

"I can assure you," Mark began——

"We want that key," de Fayenne interrupted.

"The key?"

"We want the key of the safe deposit vault which contains the papers you bought to-night from Brennan," de Fayenne persisted.

"I gathered that you wanted something that you thought was in my possession," Mark observed dryly.

"We still want it," the other reminded him.

Mark looked at his opponent speculatively. It was a cruel face, the face of a man reckless in courage and determined of purpose.

"Well as you see, I have it no longer," he pointed out.

"Then it remains for you to tell us where it is."

Mark smiled.

"If I had wished you to have it," he confided, "I should have brought it along."

"But how on earth did you dispose of it?" de Fontanay intervened. "You took it from its packet

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in the sitting-room at the Milan, and thrust it into your waistcoat pocket. We left the place together and you did not speak to a soul."

"The mistake so many people have made about me," Mark explained, as he finished tying his tie, "is that they imagine because I am big that I am therefore a fool. I did not think you would go so far as this, Raoul, although I was quite aware that it wasn't hospitality alone that you were thinking of offering me this evening. I felt I was entering the lion's den when I crossed the threshold."

De Fayenne, a light in his eyes more threatening than ever, took his Chief by the arm.

"De Fontanay," he insisted, "will you explain to your friend that we waste time. Make him understand that we are serious men and that we must have that key."

De Fontanay turned reluctantly around. His tone had become almost appealing.

"Mark," he said, "I know that the money doesn't count for much, but sooner or later you shall have the quarter of a million you paid for it. De Fayenne is right to insist upon your giving up the key. We are the servants of France. It is our duty to risk everything to attain our purpose. It is our duty even to bring suffering the most horrible upon a friend if that should help."

"You think that you can torture me?" Mark asked with scorn. "You should know me better, Raoul."

"I know you well enough, unfortunately," was the sorrowful reply, "these others do not. De Fayenne has his own methods."

Mark looked across the room. De Fayenne had divested himself of his coat, as had also the other man.

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Mark sighed. His knees still felt like paper. His arm was useless.

"I shall not tell you where the key is," he pronounced deliberately. "You can adopt what methods of compulsion you desire, and to which my friend Monsieur le Colonel de Fontanay," he added, looking at Raoul, "will consent."

De Fontanay turned away with a little groan. Suddenly the three men stiffened to attention. There was the sound of heavy footsteps outside, a clamorous ringing of the bell, followed shortly by two short knocks upon the door. The third man hurried to the window, lifted the blind and glanced down.

"The police," he muttered.

De Fontanay moved towards the hall. De Fayenne, a few inches of shining steel in his hand, drew a little nearer to Mark.

"You will not move," he directed. "You will not speak."

De Fontanay opened the outside door. A police officer was standing there, the rain streaming down from his macintosh cape. It was a supreme moment.

"Is that your car outside, sir?" he demanded.

"I guess it's mine," Mark acknowledged, raising his voice a little. "Step inside, officer. I'd like to speak to you about it."

There was a moment's tense silence. One could hear the sound of de Fayenne's indrawn breath of anger. Nevertheless his arm dropped and the pistol disappeared. The police-constable entered the room.

"If that is your car, sir," he continued, addressing Mark, "I shall require your name and address. It has been standing in the street over two hours."

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"I am very sorry," Mark replied. "The time seemed to slip away."

"Dangerous thing to do, sir, leave a car all that time, besides being against the law," the man went on. "I am sorry to tell you that there seems to have been a thief at work."

"A thief!" Mark repeated incredulously.

"You had better come down with me at once," the man suggested. "You will find things in a nice state, your cushions ripped up, and a rare mess inside."

"I'll come right down," Mark assented, picking up his overcoat and hat, and moving towards the door. "I was just leaving, anyhow. Good-night, Raoul! Good-night, gentlemen!"

No one answered. A glance of fierce questioning passed between de Fayenne and de Fontanay, and the third man crept a little nearer to the door. De Fontanay shook his head. That ponderous figure with the dripping macintosh cloak represented an *impasse*. He held the door open.

"Good-night, Mark," he said. "Sure you won't have another drink before you go?"

"Not to-night, thanks," was the emphatic reply. "I'm not sure that your whisky agrees with me."

They passed out together—Mark and the officer. The door closed behind them. They descended the three flights of stairs into the street. Mark held his hand to his head for a moment.

"Nothing wrong up there, sir?" the man asked curiously.

"Nothing exactly wrong, officer," he replied, "but these reunions get a little wearisome at times."

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"Seemed to me those two gentlemen were looking a trifle ugly," the officer observed.

"I think," Mark confided, as he drew in a long breath of the cool night air, "that they were annoyed with me for leaving so early."

Book Three

Chapter IV

AT half-past-eleven on the following morning Mark, with the hall-porter of the Milan Court by his side, stood awaiting the descent of the lift. As soon as it had arrived and its solitary passenger had departed, the hall-porter produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the contribution box to Dr. Barnardo's Homes which was fixed inside, withdrew a small object and handed it to Mark.

"That your property, sir?" he enquired.

"That's what I'm looking for," Mark replied, stowing it carefully away. "Much obliged to you, Harris. You can put this ten-pound note into the box for the Homes, and here's a fiver for yourself."

The man was not unnaturally a little staggered. He obeyed instructions, however, and carefully disposed of the five-pound note in a worn pocket-book.

"I'm sure I'm very grateful to you, sir," he acknowledged. "I don't think that box has ever had more than an odd shilling or two in it since I can remember. If I might take the liberty, sir, I would like to ask how the key got in there?"

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Mark smiled.

"To tell you the truth, Harris," he admitted, "I dropped it in on purpose. I was with a rather strange crowd last night and I knew they wanted the key. I had a chance of dropping it in unobserved, and it seemed to me that the box was as safe a hiding place as any."

The man chuckled.

"Very clever idea, sir, if you'll allow me to say so," he observed. "I'm glad you got it back all right, anyway, and good morning, sir."

He retreated behind his counter, and Mark, re-entering his car, drove to Cruton House. The great courtyard was filled with tradesmen's and decorator's vehicles, removing the débris of the festivities of the night before, and the front of the house was in an almost similar state of confusion. Mark, on giving his name, however, was conducted without delay to a room upon the first floor, half library, half sitting-room, where Felix Dukane was seated at an open desk, smoking a black cigar and writing. He looked up at Mark's entrance and scowled anxiously.

"Well?" he exclaimed.

"I have been both successful and unsuccessful, sir," Mark confessed.

"Don't beat about the bush," Dukane insisted. "Have you the key to the safe deposit vault or haven't you?"

"I have it," Mark assured him. "The box containing the papers is certainly in my possession. No one else can get at them."

So far as a countenance such as Mr. Dukane's was capable of betraying emotion, it betrayed it then. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

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"Why the hell didn't you say so at first?" he demanded.

"Because," Mark replied, "although so far as I know it makes very little difference—in fact, it is according to our arrangement—I had to give my word of honour that I was treating for these papers on my own account. That is to say that they must remain absolutely in my possession and not be handed over to anyone."

Dukane's under lip protruded.

"What does that matter," he demanded, "so long as the Frenchman hasn't got them? Have you opened the box yet?"

"Not yet," Mark admitted.

"How much did you have to pay for them?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"Do you want a cheque?"

"That had better be a subject for future arrangement. The papers are perfectly safe, at any rate for a day or two. I have pledged my word not to hand them over to you, so I am not sure that, for the present, I am entitled to your payment. I am hoping," he concluded, "that our future relations may be such that financial matters between us become unimportant."

Felix Dukane relaxed so far as to smile.

"I give you credit for persistence, Mr. Van Stratton," he admitted. "It is an excellent quality. Lunch with us to-day."

"I shall be delighted," Mark accepted promptly. "And now that I am once more alone with you, Mr. Dukane, may I take advantage of the opportunity to ask your consent to Estelle's engagement to me?"

"Do you imagine that she wants to marry you?"

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Dukane demanded, regarding almost defiantly his prospective son-in-law.

"I think she is beginning to," was the equable reply. "Very soon she will be perfectly willing."

Felix Dukane stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Do you know that my daughter is the greatest heiress in the world?" he enquired.

"I am not surprised to hear it," Mark rejoined indifferently. "In a sense it doesn't interest me. For all ordinary purposes of life I myself am wealthy."

"Still," Mr. Dukane continued, "the possession of very great wealth entails certain obligations. My daughter's dowry, not to speak of what she will inherit at my death, might well be the equivalent of the national debt of some of these small kingdoms. I have practically made up my mind, as she has already told you, that she shall marry Prince Andropulo of Drome, in which Country I have enormous interests."

"A horrible fellow!" Mark observed pleasantly. "She may toy with the idea for a time, but I am perfectly certain she could never marry him."

"You appear to be a young man who knows his own mind."

"I am."

"I share that quality. When an idea enters my brain and appeals to me, I generally carry it out. I intend my daughter to marry the Prince."

"That may be your present intention," Mark ventured, "but it is your daughter who would have to marry him, and not you. I don't think for a moment, when the time came, that she would ever consent."

"You think not," Dukane countered grimly. "Well, we shall see. You can lunch with us, anyway. I am

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in your debt. Frankly I admit that. You are temporarily out of pocket two hundred and fifty thousand pounds on my account. As you have given your word you will, I presume, have to remain in that position for the present, and I don't see what there is I can offer you beyond a luncheon. You can come out and visit us all in the East later on if you like."

"Estelle and I will not be living in the East," Mark confided. "I rather thought of a *pied-à-terre* in Paris, a villa in Beaulieu, a flat somewhere near here, or perhaps keep on my maisonette in Curzon Street, and a real English country house. I have an idea that Estelle might like to hunt. There will always be room for you."

"She will be able to hunt wild boar in the Andropulo forests," her father remarked dryly, "and I have already seen the suite in the Royal Castle which I propose to occupy."

"You won't be the first autocratic father," Mark observed amiably, "who has had to change his mind."

Mark found Mr. Hugerson seated in the easy-chair of his room, smoking a cigar and reading a copy of one of his reports. From the adjoining apartment came the click of Miss Moreland's typewriter.

"Anything for me, sir?" Mark enquired.

"Not a darned thing," his Chief replied, setting down his manuscript. "We are pretty well through, anyway. Mrs. Widdowes has been asking for you."

Mark nodded.

"No fresh leakages?" he enquired, dropping his voice.

Mr. Hugerson shook his head.

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"Not that I have heard anything of," he replied. "Sit down and have a smoke, Mark, if you've nothing to do."

"If you don't mind, sir, I'll go and see what Mrs. Widdowes wants."

Mark paused for a moment at the door to listen to the firm, metallic jangle of the typewriter. Then he made his way into the hall and met Myra, just in from riding, talking to her mother.

"Enter Mark, exhausted from his morning's work?" she exclaimed. "Mummie, I know it's early, but can we have cocktails? I had scarcely any breakfast, and such a gallop, and that poor young man looks worn out. Why are you so pale, Mark?" she went on, as they passed into the morning-room, and she rang the bell. "Is it true that Estelle Dukane is going to marry Prince Andropulo?"

"I don't think so," Mark replied cheerfully. "I have an idea that she is going to marry me some day."

"We Americans don't suffer from lack of nerve," Myra laughed. "They say that Estelle is to be a queen; and Mr. Dukane a sort of comic Prime Minister. I've been riding with your friend, Henry Dorchester. He seems rather depressed about it."

"You'll have to console one of us if the worst comes to the worst, Myra," Mark warned her.

"Yes, but the question is which?" she pointed out. "Are you lunching?"

"Not to-day."

"What a pity," she sighed. "Henry Dorchester is coming, and I should have liked to have seen you together. One can judge so much better."

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" I'm lunching with my future father-in-law," Mark confided.

" Does he know about the prospective relationship ? " she scoffed.

" Well, I've told him about it. I'll admit he seems a little sceptical."

The cocktails arrived, and with them Mr. Widdowes. He carried some official despatches in his hand.

" Any news, dad ? " Myra enquired.

" There's a rumour that our Italian friend has been making some bombastic speeches, and getting into trouble with the Court. They've got the wind-up in Whitehall about it. It seems that one of the Balkan States have applied for a meeting of the League of Nations."

" Rather by way of being a little tin god, isn't he, that Italian chap ? " Mark observed.

The Ambassador nodded thoughtfully.

" He represents a conflict between brains and a too dominant personality," he remarked. " Europe has produced several of the type lately. . . . Staying for luncheon, Mark ? "

" A little celebration of my own, sir," the latter regretted as he took his leave.

Book Three

Chapter VII

MARK, finding himself one of a luncheon party of four, with Prince Andropulo the other guest, did his

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best, not altogether successfully, to conceal his disappointment. Estelle rested her fingers upon his arm as they passed from the salon into the smaller dining-room, and whispered confidentially in his ear :

“ The Prince called on some business and father asked him to stay. You don’t mind ? ”

“ Not if he leaves directly afterwards,” Mark replied glumly. “ I want to talk to you.”

“ I’ll do my best,” she promised.

After that, luncheon became a more cheerful meal. The four of them sat at a round table upon which were a centre-piece of priceless lace, blue glass of Venetian pattern, and a great bowl of blue hyacinths. Prince Andropulo fully reciprocated and even exceeded Mark’s own lack of cordiality. Felix Dukane, on the other hand, showed most unusual signs of civility, almost of affability.

“ A young man like you,” he said to Mark, during the progress of the meal, “ with a clever father and grandfather behind him ought to take up finance.”

“ I will, sir, if you will make me a partner,” Mark suggested.

Estelle laughed softly. Even her father smiled.

“ I might consider it,” he observed—“ on terms.”

“ Finance in these days,” Prince Andropulo intervened in his rather guttural voice, “ requires brains and technical knowledge of figures.”

“ You are not, I believe, a financier ? ” Mark enquired politely.

“ I am the ruler of my Country,” the Prince answered with some stiffness. “ At present its affairs are being administered by a delegate, but I expect to be recalled at any moment.”

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"The Prince's return to his Country," Mr. Dukane explained, "is purely a matter of arrangement. The people are all tired of a republic. By the bye, Prince, you may be interested to know that I have received further reports this morning as to the oil-fields on the western side of the Kratlin Forests. The reports are on the whole exceedingly favourable."

"There is oil enough in Drome," Prince Andropulo declared confidently, "to make it one of the richest Countries for its size in the world. It needs two things only—capital and brains!"

"And a stable government," Mr. Dukane added — "a stable and popular government—one in which the people have confidence."

"That is also a vital necessity," the Prince agreed.

"I wonder whether one would ever feel really safe in one of those Far Eastern Countries—Drome, for instance?" Estelle speculated.

"Safe!" the Prince repeated, with a contraction of his eyebrows which was almost a scowl. "I do not quite comprehend."

"Well, they none of them seem to have absolutely settled down since the war, do they?" she ventured. "They are always changing their governments, having revolutions, and that sort of thing. Even you are practically exiled."

"I should scarcely consider my absence from Drome in that light," the Prince declared coldly. "I am asked by the Prime Minister of my Country to travel abroad for some months in order to stop socialistic machinations against the Constitution. It is perfectly understood that Drome will be mine again as soon as the present crisis is passed. If, five months ago," he

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went on, striking the table with his fist, " I could have found the money to pay the army and to have bought the two gunboats Turkey offered us, there would never have been any question of my leaving the palace. It is a humiliating but true confession that in Drome to-day money is our direst necessity. We have virgin forests, priceless timber, with water-ways to carry it to the sea, salt mines which have never been touched, millions of acres of oil-producing lands which have scarcely ever been tested, copper and tin mines waiting only for machinery, yet we are paralysed—paralysed for two reasons, first, because by a gross act of injustice, which before long must be remedied, the control of the railway is no longer in our hands, and secondly because all the gold of the world has passed across the seas westward. America has drained us dry. And when she sends her speculators to prospect they demand from my people options on ridiculous terms, options which would mean that all the wealth which naturally and geographically belongs to my Country must go back to the greediest land on earth for her eternal aggrandisement. No, I wait. I wait for other things."

" I am an American," Mark observed.

" So I have always understood," Prince Andropulo rejoined briefly.

Mark leaned forward, but he met Estelle's beseeching glance and held his peace.

" The other things may come," Dukane said thoughtfully. " Meanwhile, unless some unexpected tragedy occurs, Europe is in for a great revival. The Locarno peace pact was a great accomplishment, and all Europe needs now for its rehabilitation is a return in the

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shape of loans of some of the gold which has flowed Westwards."

Luncheon had reached its final stage and the cigarettes were passed around. Prince Andropulo and Mr. Dukane began to discuss some question of the the national debt of Drome. Estelle rose suddenly and touched Mark upon the arm.

"Come with me," she invited. "I am bored with the national debt of Drome. They can come in for their coffee when they are ready."

She led him away, regardless of Andropulo's frown of annoyance. They passed through the ante-room into a further apartment, a room which had been the boudoir of one of the former ladies of the house—a room about which, in the midst of an intense modernity there still hung a faint flavour of Victorianism, with water-colours upon the papered walls and stiff, but not ungraceful, furniture. Estelle laughed up at her companion.

"Well," she asked, "are you grateful? Are you going to leave off being angry with me?"

"You are wonderful," he acknowledged warmly. "There is only one thing you can do more—promise to marry me."

"I really think I shall some day," she confided. "Of course I should rather like to be a queen."

"With Andropulo for king!" Mark scoffed. "Ridiculous!"

"Still," she persisted, "the crown jewels are really very wonderful."

"I'll buy them for you," he suggested. "Andropulo looks the sort of man who would sell anything."

She laughed.

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"They will not let them go out of the palace, or I expect he would have pawned them before . . . Tell me about your triumph. You seem to have won father's complete approval."

"There wasn't much of a triumph about it," Mark confessed a little ruefully. "I simply put up the money which de Fontanay couldn't raise."

"Poor de Fontanay!" she murmured. "Twice now he has failed, and why should he worry! France does well enough. Tell me, Mark, when are you going to actually possess yourself of Brennan's secrets?"

"The day after to-morrow," Mark replied.

"Who's going to be present when you open the box?"

"Brennan," Mark answered; "he insisted upon it."

She leaned a little towards him, listened for a moment to the sound of the voices in the dining-room, and whispered almost in his ear. With the lightest of touches she had the trick of suggesting a caress.

"Mark," she whispered, "I wish to come. Can I?"

He shook his head doubtfully.

"You know how difficult Brennan is."

"Not about me," she declared eagerly. "It's only father he can't bear. In a way it will be almost a historical moment to see papers, hear things, which would set the world aflame again. Mark, I must be there!"

He turned towards her, and for a single moment, she rested resistless in his arms, his lips touched hers passionately. Then she gently extricated herself. There were sounds of movement in the other room.

"Estelle!" he begged. "Just that one word, please."

"Don't be too impatient," she whispered back. "I will tell you something, if you like. Then you can judge for yourself. I have never let anyone do that before

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you—that afternoon in the taxicab. I never wanted to.”

“Not even Andropulo?” he laughed happily.

She made a little grimace from her chair behind the coffee tray. A footman entered with liqueurs, and the voices of Mr. Dukane and the Prince became audible as they approached. They were still talking as they entered the room.

“To pay back the interest on the government bonds,” Andropulo was saying eagerly, “would take little more than a matter of three millions at the present rate of exchange. It would create an unheard of wave of patriotism, and of loyalty towards the Government throughout the country. My people are loyal enough,” he went on, “but they have been near to starvation. The dynasty which can show them the land of plenty is going to be the dynasty which they will accept, and to which they will adhere.”

“Sounds interesting—very interesting,” Felix Dukane confessed as he stirred his coffee. “I have at odd times controlled some of the greatest industrial enterprises in the world, some whose capital ran into almost incredible figures, but an entire kingdom, a taxable kingdom, with undeveloped resources, and a national debt to deal with, is an absolutely new problem. I contemplate it, Prince, with pleasure. Wait only one week for my definite reply.”

The Prince hurried over to the other side of the room, and bent over Estelle. Mark watched him with distaste.

“Don’t get too interested in that Country of Andropulo’s, sir,” he begged.

“I am very interested in it, indeed,” was the almost dogged reply. “Don’t you get building on the impossible, young man.”

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"Nothing is impossible if we want it badly enough, sir."

Felix Dukane stood squarely on his feet for a moment with his hands clasped behind him and his underlip protruding. He had the appearance of one about to make a pronouncement.

"Young man," he said, "what the people of your Country need is a set-back. You cannot believe that there is anything in the world you can't have. By following a safe policy for the last fifteen years you have become the richest and the most powerful country in the world. You have sent every exchange in Europe rocky because you have stored away all the gold. Your women have come over here and allied themselves with all the great names in England, France and Italy, and now you come and coolly tell me that you intend to marry my daughter—the greatest heiress in the world. I don't like young men, as a rule, Van Stratton. I rather like you, but I'm damned if you're going to play your Country's game and help yourself to everything for which you have a fancy. Now go away. I have business to attend to."

Notwithstanding this abrupt dismissal, Mark made his adieux with almost a light heart, for Estelle smiled upon him once more as he had bowed over her fingers.

Book Three

Chapter VIII

MR. HUGERSON, upon Mark's appearance at the Embassy on the following morning, was holding what

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amounted to a formal levée amongst the secretaries and clerks with whom he had been brought into contact. He welcomed Mark cordially.

"Glad you're up to time, young man, this morning," he observed. "I've got my marching orders. Sailing from Southampton to-night."

"Isn't that rather unexpected, sir?" Mark asked.

"I guess our number 7 committee have got the wind up," Mr. Hugerson declared. "Anyway, they want me back at Washington at once to appear before a commission. There's very little left that I haven't told them," he went on, "but I expect there are one or two things they want to have from the old man himself."

The little group of visitors dispersed one by one. Mark and Mr. Hugerson were presently left alone.

"It's this Drome business that's making the trouble, Mark," his Chief confided. "If there's one thing touches them on the raw in the Senate, it's when anyone else gets concessions in a foreign Country which they think ought to have come to Americans. These delegates from the Middle West stand up and screech like wild men. According to some of them you'd think that God made the world for Americans, and nobody else was allowed to live except on suffrance. Of course those last oil concessions were half promised to an American Syndicate, but if the Government of Drome chooses to part with them to someone else there's nothing we can say about it."

"We could send a note," Mark remarked with a smile.

"That's getting to be our habit, the fundamental principle of our foreign policy is to keep out of all entanglements, alliances, or treaties of any sort with

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European Countries. That's all very well, but if we stand on one side altogether, as we have to, we can't help someone else nipping in and getting away with the goods. If a Country has something to sell for good red gold, and has two customers, both with the money, naturally she chooses the one who can give her a leg-up in international affairs. I wouldn't be an American Consul these days for anything in the world."

"Is there anything I can do to help your getting off, sir?" Mark asked.

"Not a thing," Mr. Hugerson replied, holding out his hand. "You can come down to the station at three o'clock, if you've nothing to do. I'm glad we met, young fellow, for your father's sake as well as your own. You've been very helpful to me. Look me up the next time you're over our side, and if you take this job up seriously, let me know. I might be able to put something in your way later on."

"You're very kind, sir," Mark declared gratefully. "And as for the work, it's been fine having it to do. . . ."

Mark, wandering about restlessly for a moment or two after his Chief's departure, found his way to Frances Moreland's room. He discovered her seated idly before her typewriter, her great eyes fixed upon the little strip of river just visible between a gap in the buildings. She welcomed him without a smile. He almost fancied indeed that she shivered at the sound of his voice.

"Well," he said, "we've seen it through with Mr. Hugerson then. Great chap for detail, wasn't he? I expect you got pretty well sick of those reports."

"I'm glad it's over," she admitted. "In a few minutes I shall put the cover upon my typewriter, and finish—for good, I hope."

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"You're giving up work?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to be married to Sidney Howlett in a few weeks."

"Well, that's good news," he declared cheerfully.

"I hope I'll be invited to the wedding."

"You'd hate it," she assured him. "Sidney has quite a lot of relatives and we're going to be married from Crouch End."

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "If you don't send me an invitation you'll never hear the end of it."

She smiled for the first time, a little wanly, and turned towards him. Her fingers strayed to the box of cigarettes at her side. She lit one, and leaned back in her chair.

"Mr. Van Stratton," she said, "you always seem to me to be full of robust common sense. Help me."

"Why, give me a chance," he invited.

"A problem has come into my life—something that is always bothering me. I cannot make up my mind exactly how much one owes to oneself and one's happiness as against, say the ordinary schemes of conduct, one's subscription to the everyday morality of life."

"Make it as simple as you can," he begged.

"In order to make my marriage possible," she continued, "I committed an unmoral action. I won't specify it. I will not say whether it was theft, or what. It was without a doubt a wrong and wicked thing to do, and I did it. If I hadn't, I should probably never have been married. I should have lost any little chance of happiness which might ever have come to me in life. I was a long time making up my mind," she went on

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thoughtfully. "I know so many people who seem to have led absolutely good lives and found no reward—women of my own age who have lived respectably and nicely, helped other people, and afterwards have had to face an old age of loneliness. I suppose I was wrong. I came to the deliberate conclusion that an over-rigid subscription to the moralities of life brings no reward in this world, and I haven't, alas! faith in any other."

"Every code of morals must be more or less elastic," Mark declared after a moment's reflection. "If you could do a great deal of good to yourself, at the expense of a little harm to others, I shouldn't hesitate. After all, as a happy woman you're an asset to the world. Your own happiness does good to everyone around you as well as to yourself. There is always that point of view to be considered."

"It's rather a comforting point of view," she acknowledged.

He seated himself for a moment upon the edge of her table.

"It's sane enough," he contended, "and you want to tack on to it just one thread of philosophy. If you've counted the cost and done a thing, wipe out doubts. You can't alter it. It's done. Take what's coming to you."

She smiled.

"I knew I should find it a relief to talk to you," she confided. "I shall lay hold of that thread as hard as I can. All my life," she went on, "I shall suffer just a little. On the other hand, I know that I shall often be happy. I would rather have the mixture than the grey days."

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"Stick to that," he advised. "You're dead right!"

He took her hand into his, resisting at that moment his desire to tell her the truth. Her eyes were soft with unshed tears. He felt that she was very near a dangerous breakdown. On the opposite pavement in the street below, he could see Sidney Howlett, his hands in his over-coat pockets, trudging up and down. Mark slipped from the table.

"How long are you going to be packing up?" he asked, in his most matter-of-fact tone.

"Half-an-hour, I daren't be longer. Mr. Howlett isn't the most patient of men, and he's been waiting a few minutes already. I told him we'd go off and look at some furniture."

"I'm leaving in a minute," Mark confided. "I'll talk to him."

"That would be very good of you," she acknowledged gratefully.

He purposely avoided anything more definite in the way of farewells, and made his way out into the street. Mr. Sidney Howlett welcomed him a little doubtfully.

"Everything O.K.?" he enquired.

"Everything is O.K." Mark replied a little gravely, "but I want just a word with you. Let's stroll along the Mall. Have a cigarette?"

Mr. Howlett accepted one readily. He had not the slightest objection to being seen walking with this very noteworthy-looking young man.

"Preparations going on all right for the wedding, eh?" Mark asked.

"No hitch that I know of," Mr. Howlett replied. "We're going to look at some furniture this morning—cards being printed for the 15th of next month. Proud

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to have you look in and take a glass of wine with us, sir. It's a trifle out of your beat, perhaps—Crouch End—but my aunt's running the show. Nice healthy neighbourhood when you get there."

"I'll come if I'm in the Country," Mark promised. "You've seen or heard nothing more from your friend?"

"Not a thing," Howlett declared. "I just paid him that one visit, told him that there wasn't gold enough in the Bank of England to buy the young woman, and that was the end of it."

Mark nodded approvingly.

"As soon as we can," he insisted, "we must relieve Miss Moreland's mind. She's beginning to worry a little as it is, I'm afraid. You'll look after her, Howlett?"

"No doubt about that, sir," was the prompt rejoinder. "We ought to pull it off all right—neither of us too young, and starting as I'd never hoped to start, with a house of our own, a nice block of War Loan, and plenty of money in the bank."

"I fancy she'll worry a little until she knows the truth," Mark observed. "Still, that won't be long. You look after her well, Howlett. There aren't many women better worth having."

Mark took his leave with a nod of farewell, and Howlett crossed the road a few minutes later to meet Frances issuing from the official door of the Embassy. He looked at her with critical eyes, more than ever convinced of her desirability, yet conscious of a certain elusiveness which mocked his efforts at comprehension. She had style, he decided—something indefinable—some charm, perhaps, which he was not quite capable

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of understanding. The thought of his own good fortune, that solid block of War Loan, the little house, already half-filled with furniture, made a new appeal to him. He took Frances's hand and drew it through his arm.

"Old girl," he said, "we'll have an early luncheon, do ourselves well at the Troc., eh, and see about the furniture afterwards. We'll make a day of it. I can spare the time."

His eagerness was evident, his admiration apparent. Frances drew a little sigh of content. She had paid her price, but he was her man.

Book Three

Chapter IX

MARK reached home that afternoon to find Robert answering the telephone.

"A lady wishes to speak to you, sir," he announced. "I heard the car stop, so I told her you were just arriving. You are switched through to the library."

Mark hurried there, without stopping to remove his overcoat. In reply to his tentative "Hullo," Estelle's voice came drifting down the wire.

"Do you know that you have been keeping me waiting disgracefully?" she complained.

"I had to spend the morning at the Embassy, and I have only just returned," he confided. "Shall I come round and apologise? I was just going to ring you up."

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"I wish you could," she answered, "but I am being taken to a stupid tea. I do not wish to go, but it is necessary. Would you like to come and dine?"

"Should I like to dine!" he repeated ecstatically. "What time?"

"At half-past-eight. There will be rather a crowd of people, but fortunately there is just room for a well-mannered young man who is something of a conversationalist, and can flirt with his next-door neighbour if she desires it. I thought of you at once."

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "As it's a large party, wouldn't it be a good opportunity to announce our engagement?"

"Am I going to have that sort of trouble with you to-night?" she asked, with mock severity.

"Why call it trouble?" he protested. "When a thing has to be done, why not face it?"

"But I thought I told you the other day," she reminded him, "that father is very ungracious about it all. He still thinks he wants to be Prince Andropulo's Chancellor of the Exchequer, and make a hobby of his Country."

"Why not, if it amuses him?" Mark rejoined. "We will go and see him for a fortnight every year. You won't want to stay longer. It's a beastly uncomfortable Country, and a wretched climate. My programme is best; Cannes and Egypt in the winter, Paris for a month in the Spring, and England for the summer, with a little hunting to finish up with."

"It does sound rather attractive," she admitted. "Perhaps father will be in a good humour to-night. Now, I am going to ring off. You can talk about your plans for the future to Sybil Loftus at dinner. She

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will be your next-door neighbour. It is quite time she was married, and I think she likes you."

"The Prince will be looking for some consolation soon," Mark observed. "Why not throw them together?"

Estelle, with a little laugh, terminated the conversation. Mark turned away with a satisfied smile, and took off his overcoat. The world seemed a very wonderful place just then. On his way to the door, he met Robert, announcing a visitor.

"Colonel de Fontanay is here, sir."

Mark was for the moment completely taken aback.

"The devil!" he murmured. "You mean that he has called, that he is actually here?"

"He is in the hall, sir. He preferred to wait there until I had announced him."

Mark hesitated. He was never afterwards able to account for the singular reluctance with which he gave the obvious order.

"Show him in," he directed.

If there was any animosity mingled with Mark's surprise, it vanished as soon as Raoul de Fontanay crossed the threshold. With his palid complexion and deep-set eyes, he had never been a strong-looking man, but his appearance now was almost ghastly. His cheeks seemed to have fallen in. There were faint violet lines under his eyes, a depressing lifelessness about his tone and manner.

"You consent to receive me, then?" he asked pathetically.

Mark had forgotten all his resentment. He gripped his friend by the hand.

"Don't be an idiot, Raoul!" he exclaimed, wheeling

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forward an arm-chair. "You played the game all right, even though I was the victim. Nothing fresh gone wrong, I hope."

"Everything is wrong," de Fontanay replied, as he sank into the chair a little wearily. "Have you seen the midday telegrams?"

"I haven't seen a midday paper at all," Mark acknowledged.

"The franc is 170, and still falling."

Mark tapped the end of a cigarette a little impatiently upon the table.

"After all, you know, Raoul," he said, "French finance is her own affair."

"It is nothing of the sort," was the bitter reply. "Not only France's financial future, but her honour is being gambled in by the man whom you are shielding."

"Can you prove that?" Mark asked.

De Fontanay unfastened his coat, from the breast-pocket of which he produced a little sheaf of papers.

"I do not suppose that these will interest you," he admitted gloomily. "After all, it is another Country, not yours, whose destruction is planned. Nevertheless, for my conscience's sake, I have paid you this visit, although my knees trembled upon your threshold. You shall read the letters, you who might have set your heel upon the whole conspiracy."

Mark moved uneasily in his place and stretched out his hand for the little packet.

"These reached me yesterday," de Fontanay continued. "Curiously enough a messenger brought them across by air, and they were in my hands almost as you were driving away from Marylebone in triumph. You have never believed in any real chicanery with

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regard to this continual fall of our currency. You always professed to believe that it was the result of our internal politics. Let me hear what you have to say now ? ”

Mark glanced through the letters, casually enough at first, then with an interest which became graver and more concentrated with every line he read.

“ These,” de Fontanay confided, “ are the result of a year’s work by Victor de Fayenne—Colonel de Fayenne’s brother. They must carry conviction, because they are true. In Brennan’s box lies the proof of the whole disgraceful commerce.”

Mark read on with an absorbed air, his expression all the time becoming more troubled. When he had finished, he was silent for several moments. He looked steadfastly across at Raoul, leaning back in his chair, in an attitude of complete dejection.

“ Do you believe in the truth of this story, Raoul ? ” he asked.

“ Before God, I do,” de Fontanay declared. “ It was Deselles’ mistress who supplied de Fayenne with a copy of that last letter. It cost two hundred and fifty thousand francs, but it was worth it. The motion will be brought before the Senate next week. It will be seriously proposed, by the head of the party who command to-day a majority, that France disgraces herself in the face of the whole world by a deed which she will call ‘ stabilising her currency.’ In plain words, she will tell the world that she cannot pay, and offer fifty per cent. Her currency is cut in half. She is to lose for ever her place amongst the nations, that Felix Dukane and his vicious gang may add millions to their horde, and Deselles may be in a position to gratify the

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whims of the most extravagant woman in the world. Do you think it is fair, Mark, that one man, already bloated with wealth, should be permitted to gamble, not with gold alone, but with a nation's honour? "

"Why did you come here to me, Raoul?" Mark asked his friend a little abruptly. "Why did you bring me this story now?"

"With a very faint and lingering hope," de Fontanay explained. "If I had been able to convince you of the whole of the truth, before you had made your arrangement with Brennan, I believe that my appeal to you would not have been in vain. You would have understood more clearly the nature of the dastardly scheme which you were helping Dukane to conceal. Then you would have handed me the papers I require from that box. Even now," he went on, with a little quiver in his voice, "at the eleventh hour, it is not too late."

"I have given my word," Mark muttered.

De Fontanay sprang to his feet. He was suddenly electrified. The light of hope flamed from his eyes. He laid his hands upon his friend's shoulders. His worn face was transfigured with emotion.

"Mark," he cried, "our friendship began in the thunder of battle and it has been sanctified by blood. I made one appeal to you, and failed. That is because I could only guess at the damning facts which now can be proved. You have still a decision to make, or rather, to un-make. I implore you by our friendship to do the great thing. It is for the sake of this girl alone you hesitate. I ask you—I dare to ask you, Mark—to forget her, to look at this matter as a strong, sane man, to whom chance has given a great opportunity. Keep

silent, and you will become Dukane's catspaw. You may win the girl, but your conscience will never again be free. The great thing, Mark ! Upon the altar of our friendship, Mark, I demand from you the great thing ! ”

De Fontanay stood a little back, his eyes unnaturally brilliant, fixed upon his friend's, the latter part of his speech broken with emotion. A bright spot of colour burned upon his cheeks. His lips were as tremulous as a woman's.

“ Mark,” he concluded, “ this is not the first time that the history of a nation has been made and changed in strange places, in strange fashion, by unknown people into whose hands power has drifted almost by chance. It is a great decision which rests with you now. You must ask yourself, apart from all sense of friendship, as a man of honour, are you justified in shielding a miscreant who has so far corrupted a great statesman that the two between them are contemplating unspeakable infamy ? Are you justified, Mark ? You will be a young man still in twelve or fifteen years, and memory will live with you Think ! ”

Mark walked over to the window, and stood there for a moment or two looking out. Already his decision was taken, although, with it much of the buoyancy of life seemed to have left him. Presently he turned around.

“ I guess you're right, Raoul,” he admitted. “ Brennan's box shall be opened to-night.”

De Fontanay crossed the room with uncertain footsteps. His eyes were filled with tears, which he made no effort to conceal. He passed his arm through Mark's with all the gentleness of a woman. From under his breath came a faint reminiscence of that far-away tune. Of words, however, he was no longer capable.

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Book Three

Chapter X

MARK, with a heavy heart and oppressed with a numbed sense of the whole unreality of life, found himself one of a brilliant gathering that night. From the first he was flattered even though he was tortured by the kindness of Estelle's greeting, the little half-pressure of the fingers she gave him, the pleasant way in which she introduced him to those of the assembled guests with whom he was unacquainted. Even Felix Dukane was for him most genial, accepting Mark's presence with resignation, if not with enthusiasm. Mark realised with a pang which tore at his very heart strings that his invitation that night was not altogether so casual as it had seemed. There was a delightful though indefinite note of familiarity in Estelle's manner, a faint air of proprietorship, which a few hours ago would have filled him with joy and confidence. The Prince, too, was an absent guest. Mark commented upon the fact as Estelle showed him a little plan of the table, standing upon an ivory easel.

"Ought I to have asked him instead of you?" she whispered. "Somehow I thought not—now—and father gave in quite good-naturedly, when I insisted."

"You wanted me?" he managed to ask.

"It rather looks like it," she confessed, turning away to welcome the last guest.

At dinner-time, Mark was conscious of contributing his quota to the conversation with almost unimaginable mechanicalness. He found his companion, Sybil Loftus, delightful, but a little inquisitive. There was, in fact, during those days, a general brooding air

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of mystery about all European affairs, which provoked curiosity even on the part of the general public.

"You're in the American Embassy, are you not?" she enquired, during a pause in the conversation.

"In a very humble capacity," Mark confessed.

"I saw you with Mr. Hugerson the other day," she observed. "Father says he is one of the most interesting Americans who has ever visited London."

"Then, without knowing your father," Mark said, "I should put him down as a very sensible man. I only wish we had more politicians of Hugerson's type."

"You were his secretary or something, weren't you?" Mark shook his head.

"I did a little work for him—nothing that counted."

The young woman sighed.

"Dear me," she regretted, "and I did hope you would tell me all about his mission to Europe! My brother takes a tremendous interest in international politics, and he's so anxious to know."

"Anyway, I am not a politician."

"But you're a diplomat, aren't you?"

"Even a minor diplomat is not allowed to talk politics at the dinner table," he reminded her discreetly. She laughed.

"Then I will tell you of a string of polo ponies I know of down in Norfolk," she suggested—"none of them up to your weight, I am afraid, but wonderful animals, all of them." . . .

Dinner passed cheerfully on to its appointed end; cheerfully as regards the majority of the guests, even though to Mark it was almost a nightmare. Felix Dukane, although not loquacious, proved himself an

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adequate host, and Estelle, as Mark realised with a little inward groan, in spite of the simplicity of her black gown and the absence of any ornament save a single string of perfect but unostentatious pearls, not only seemed more beautiful than ever, but displayed all the charm of the born hostess and the tact which inspires a ready flow of agreeable conversation. The aftermath of dinner was singularly brief. There was a great political reception to which most of the people were going on, also a dance. The men lingered only a few minutes or so over their wine and immediately afterwards there was a general exit. Mark summoned his courage and approached Felix Dukane.

"I wonder if I could have a word with you before I leave, sir?" he asked.

Dukane assented, not ungraciously.

"The same old subject, I suppose," he grumbled. "Well, we'd better have Estelle too, and hear what she has to say."

Again Mark groaned inwardly. He realised that Estelle's influence had been at work. The battle was won, only to be lost again.

"If she cares to come," he assented. "What I have to say concerns her, too, to a certain extent."

They drifted into the library, and Estelle, who had joined them, threw herself into an easy-chair with a little yawn, which was only half natural. Her lips were curved in a pleasant smile, her eyes were fixed thoughtfully but kindly upon the man who was fast taking his place in her thoughts as her lover. Mark himself was desperately uncomfortable. He had made no plans as to how to commence his avowal. Everything at first seemed blank before him.

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"I am afraid that I am going to displease you very much indeed, Mr. Dukane," he began.

"You have done that already," was the curt but surprised retort. "Never mind about the preamble. Get on with what you have to say."

Mark took hold of himself. He kept his head turned away from Estelle. The disturbance of her presence made his task almost more difficult.

"I wanted to tell you," he continued, "that I have decided to break my promise, and to open Brennan's box to-night."

There was a moment's silence. It was obvious that both father and daughter were surprised. Estelle sat up.

"What a shock!" she exclaimed. "And I thought you had come to talk about me!"

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" Dukane demanded angrily. "It was agreed between us that you should hold everything up until I gave the word."

"That was my intention," Mark acknowledged. "Something has happened to change my mind. A few hours ago, I was shown what I consider convincing evidence that this continual fall of the franc which is creating such distress throughout France is the result of a systematic and malevolent conspiracy."

There was a queer silence in the little room. The words which Mark had expected would have fallen like a bombshell seemed, for the moment, at any rate, to have made no impression whatever. Mark, however, glancing timorously across towards Estelle seemed to read the coming of his doom.

"Where did you get this from?" Dukane sneered.

"Colonel de Fontanay."

"A Frenchman, of course!"

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"Mr. Dukane," Mark continued, a little desperately, "every Frenchman is not an hysterical boob. Raoul de Fontanay is one of my best friends, and a man whose word can be relied upon. You know what France suffered during the war; so do I. I was out there from 1915 until the end. I know what sacrifices she made. Do you think that she deserves, when it is all over and the war has been won, to be forced back amongst the ranks of the second-rate nations."

"Who is trying to do that?" Dukane demanded.

"A syndicate of financiers, whose names are to be found in one of Brennan's documents. That is not the worst, however. Of that I had an inkling before. What I did not know was that one of the most popular French statesmen of the day is in league with that syndicate. The evidence of his complicity is one of Brennan's most treasured secrets. De Fontanay has demanded that I publish the facts."

"And your reply?" Dukane almost shouted.

Mark moistened his dry lips. He turned a little towards Estelle, as though to include her in his appeal.

"Sir," he went on, "I beg you to consider for a moment the dilemma in which I am placed. I fought first for France, and then for my own country, in what we all consider to have been a very righteous war. For the whole of the campaign I was in France. I saw her towns ravaged, her countryside pillaged. I watched her heroic struggles through the years. I took count of that stupendous roll of her dead. We all made our sacrifices, but even if we should say that they were equal sacrifices, it would still be unfair that France should be the one nation, whilst struggling for rehabilitation, to be assailed in her most vulnerable point, and

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to be brought to a position from which she would probably never recover. I bought those papers from Brennan chiefly, it is true, for your sake, and because I want to marry Estelle, but I had no idea that their contents were in any way of a disgraceful nature."

"You acted on my initiative," Dukane reminded him harshly. "You were only a figure-head in the business."

"At that stage, perhaps so," Mark admitted. "Anyhow, I have succeeded, as you know. I promised you to keep the box containing these papers unopened for a month. I am sorry, but I have come to tell you that I am compelled to break my word."

The silence this time was of a different order. Dukane was breathing heavily, fighting for self-control.

"You are setting yourself deliberately, you a minnow in the game," he shouted, his chin out-thrust, his small eyes narrowed to bright points of anger, "to ruin the greatest scheme I have ever conceived in my life."

"I regret it more than I can tell you," was the sad acknowledgment, "but there are some things which one must decide not according to one's preferences, but according to one's conscience."

"Blast your conscience, and to hell with you!" Dukane thundered . . . "You hear this—you hear this, Estelle?"

"I have heard every word," she answered.

"Do you blame me?" Mark appealed, turning towards her, with a little break in his voice.

She threw the end of the cigarette which she had lit a few minutes before into the fire, and leaned over to touch the bell.

"My dear Mr. Van Stratton," she said, "I think of

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you, as I have always thought of most men at various points in their careers—that you are an imbecile. I am disappointed. I have rung for your car.”

Book Three

Chapter XI

FOR the first time in his life, Mark, who was somewhat of a stickler in such matters, crossed the threshold of the famous Café de France not only in tweed travelling clothes, but with the signs of a hurried journey not yet obliterated. An attendant at the door stretched forth a patronising but restraining arm; a *maitre d'hôtel*, however, who reckoned Mark amongst the most distinguished of his occasional clients hastened forward, although he, too, scanned his prospective diner's attire a little dubiously.

“Monsieur Van Stratton!” he greeted him, with a bow. “A great pleasure, monsieur! Monsieur has just arrived and wishes to reserve a table perhaps, for to-morrow, or for later on to-night?”

Mark drew the man on one side.

“Léon,” he confided, “it is necessary that I speak at once with Monsieur Deselles.”

Léon shook his head doubtfully.

“Monsieur Deselles is dining here certainly, with Madame,” he admitted, “but it would take courage to disturb him. It is only occasionally that we are honoured by his presence, and it is understood that so far as we are concerned he remains incognito.”

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“ Léon,” Mark insisted, “ you know very well that when I am in earnest about a matter something has to happen. I must speak to Monsieur Deselles, without an instant’s delay, and in his own interests. You need not enter into the matter at all ; just point him out to me. When you say that he is with Madame——? ”

Léon coughed.

“ Madame, his mistress,” he explained in a low tone. “ She is a well-known figure in Paris, as Monsieur is doubtless aware.”

“ Show me where he is sitting,” Mark begged.

Léon was faced with the inevitable.

“ In any case,” he compromised, “ there will be no mention of my having done so ? ”

“ I promise you that faithfully,” Mark acquiesced. “ You need have little concern, though, for Monsieur Deselles will not long be a client of yours.”

“ Monsieur et Madame are seated at the corner table on the right behind me,” Léon indicated. “ It is the table which is reserved for them every Friday night.”

Mark wasted no more time. He threaded his way between the tables, still crowded with all that was most *chic* in the life of the Parisian who dines and is fortunate enough to be able to secure a place in the Café de France. Curious gazes followed him, for his appearance in such a scene was unusual. The famous restaurant expressed then as always the last word in the dignity, refinement and luxury of dining. There was no music, somewhat sombre decorations, French arm-chairs of a faithful design, glass which was as famous as the vintages poured into it, service world-renowned for its silence and efficiency. To be sure

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of a table at the Café de France was equivalent to belonging to one of the best clubs in the city. At the moment of Mark's entrance, its atmosphere was perhaps supremely typical. It was past ten o'clock, and the actual business of dining was in most places concluded. Faint blue clouds of cigarette and cigar smoke ascended to the decorated ceiling, mingling with the perfume shaken from the toilettes and coiffures of the very beautiful women, who lent their graces to their more sombrely attired companions. There was a sense of leisurely Utopian luxury about this after-dinner langour, almost a cult of the hour when Sybaritically ministered to. Mark passed through it all, a stern, pale figure, unusual in looks, size and apparel, an object of mild speculation to the women toying with their vanity cases, and their male companions glancing indifferently through their bills. In the corner indicated by Léon was seated a man whom Mark recognised at once from the many sketches and caricatures reproduced of him—a fair, slight man, with a face which would have been insignificant save for its deep forehead, with small, fair moustache a little turned up, a general air of elegance, sufficiently apparent to be disturbing to the Anglo-Saxon standard. By his side was the most beautiful woman in the room, leaning sensuously back on the settee, touching with a lip stick her already becarmined lips. The man watched Mark's advance with a supercilious frown. A friend who had just strolled up, turned and surveyed him with something of the same expression. Mark stood before the table and bowed slightly to the woman.

"Monsieur Deselles, I believe?" he said.

"Not in this place," was the somewhat insolent reply.

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"I am accustomed to be addressed only by my personal friends."

"I have important business with you," Mark ventured.

"I transact business only in my government bureau, I beg that you will seek me there if you have anything to say, and relieve us now of your presence!"

The third young man dropped his eyeglass and smiled. Mark remained unmoved.

"My business with you, sir, is urgent," he insisted. "You are acquainted, perhaps, with Mr. Felix Dukane?"

There was an instant's silence. Madame's fingers, which had been holding the lip stick, seemed suddenly frozen.

"I am acquainted with Monsieur Dukane," the minister acknowledged in a subdued tone, from which the previous note of insolence was now absent.

"I am here on his business," Mark proceeded. "I was with him this morning. I chartered a plane, and flew over at midday, and have spent the time since my arrival searching for you."

Deselles glanced at his chance companion.

"If you would excuse us for a few moments, dear Baron," he begged, "perhaps after all this person may have something of interest to say."

The young man who had formed the third in the little party, raised Madame's fingers to his lips, and drifted away. At a sign from Deselles, Mark took his place.

"I do not know you, sir," the former said. "I have never previously received any message from Monsieur Dukane through you. Have you credentials?"

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"I have none," Mark admitted, "and yet I must tell you that my business is not only urgent—it is vital. Will you hear the news I bring here, before Madame, or shall we leave this place?"

Deselles glanced around. His corner, chosen for that reason, was entirely remote. Of Madame, he seemed not to think. In her eyes, however, there had already crept something of fear—large brown eyes, they were, beautiful in their calmer moments.

"I still do not understand your visit," Deselles pronounced, "but the name of Dukane is a talisman. You can speak."

"I bring bad news," Mark said. "I have broken it to Dukane. He would have come himself to you, but he has other business these few hours. You have heard of a man named Brennan?"

"The international spy?" Deselles exclaimed.

"The same," Mark answered. "He has spied to some effect upon Dukane. I do best, perhaps, to show you this photograph of a letter."

Mark produced his pocket-book, opened it, and passed across the table a rolled and unmounted photograph. The woman's fingers had been suddenly clasped together with such force that an emerald ring was biting into her flesh. Her eyes were riveted upon the few lines of reproduced hand-writing in her companion's fingers. It was he who showed the greater composure.

"So we have been betrayed," he muttered.

"It is scarcely my affair," Mark pointed out. "These proofs, of what I suppose even you will acknowledge to be a damnable conspiracy, came into my hands almost by accident."

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"And what have you done with them?" Deselles demanded.

"By this time," Mark replied gravely, "they are in the hands of the French Secret Service. I promised Dukane that I would do my best to let you know in time."

"In time!" Deselles repeated in a voice which seemed to come from a strange distance.

"Your motion was to come before the Senate to-morrow, I believe."

Deselles' fingers played with the reproduction of the letter. Mark shook his head.

"The original," he confided, "is already in the hands of Raoul de Fontanay. You are welcome to that copy if you will."

Deselles for a moment sat in deep thought. Then he turned his head very slowly towards his companion. He saw the livid mark on her fingers where the ring had cut. He saw, too, without a doubt—for in his way he was the possessor of great perceptions—something in those suddenly drawn features, a glaze in the wonderful eyes which told him the truth. Nevertheless, he said nothing.

"I do not know whether I have to thank or curse you, sir," he said, "but at least I am glad to have your news before it can reach the Press. There is no way, no means, by which——"

"No means on heaven or earth," Mark assured him. "Felix Dukane has offered everything. The thing is already accomplished. De Fontanay is my friend. Brennan sold me his secret, and de Fontanay possesses it."

Deselles held up his finger to a passing waiter.

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“ L’addition,” he commanded. “ Under the circumstances, sir,” he added, turning to Mark, “ we need not, I suppose, detain you further.”

“ I have carried out my mission,” Mark assented, rising to his feet. “ It was not a pleasant one, but somehow or other, before to-morrow, it was necessary that you should know.”

“ Before to-morrow ! . . . Precisely,” Deselles replied, with a bow.

Mark turned away. Madame had half-risen to her feet. Deselles’ slim white fingers touched her wrist, and drew her back. Mark heard his little speech.

“ The next hour, I think, dear Annette,” he said, “ we will spend together.”

Mark made his way to the small hotel of which he had been a frequent patron, where he engaged a room and dined. Afterwards he slept a little longer than he had intended, so that the greyness of the early morning was passing as he drove through the streets on his way to Le Bourget, where he had left his plane. There were crowds gathered round the kiosks, boys waving placards right and left. The streams of *ouvriers* and smaller tradespeople on their way to work seemed paralysed in their progress. Mark, too, paused and bought the newspaper :

Monsieur Deselles est Mort !

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Book Three

Chapter XII

"No good hoping for Mark, I suppose?" Dorchester asked, as he and de Fontanay lingered over their cocktails in the lounge of the Ritz.

"I am afraid not," was the regretful reply. "I've tried every way I could think of—Curzon Street, the little hotel he stayed in after he flew over to Paris, and the Embassy. For the last three weeks he seems to have disappeared altogether."

"Have you any idea," Dorchester continued, "what sent him over to Paris at a moment's notice like that?"

De Fontanay smiled—a thin, peculiar smile, yet not without a certain quality of sweetness.

"Perhaps I have," he murmured, "but it is his affair . . . And behold!"

Mark came striding down the vestibule and up the steps, both hands outstretched. He was looking well but a little thinner. There was an unaccustomed gravity of expression, too, not altogether unbecoming.

"Congratulations, Henry!" he exclaimed heartily. "I read *The Times* coming across. Myra is one of the sweetest girls I know. You're a lucky fellow."

"I feel it," Dorchester declared, "and I thank you, Mark. You and she are old pals, I know. I'm afraid," he added, after a moment's hesitation—

"Yes, I read the other paragraph too," Mark interrupted. "Estelle is to marry Prince Andropulo after all. Well, I'll say that was coming to me. Fate seems to have set me up against Dukane at every turn of the game lately. It can't be helped."

"Won't you congratulate me, too?" de Fontanay

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who had turned aside to order Mark's cocktail, asked quietly. "The franc to-day is under a hundred, and our budget passed the Senate with only a few socialistic votes against it."

"Of course I congratulate you, Raoul," Mark acquiesced. "France was bound to find herself again, though. Here's luck! Now tell me the rest of the news."

"It will take us pretty well all luncheon-time," Dorchester remarked. "You know, of course, that your father-in-law who was to have been is reported to have lost twelve millions of his ill-gotten gains over the franc business."

"Serve him right for tinkering with that fellow Deselles," Mark observed, accepting his cocktail. "That was one of the most scandalous intrigues of the century."

They made their way presently into lunch—the same table, the same little crowd of waiters, anxious to obey their slightest wish. In a sense it was very reminiscent of that luncheon party of a few months ago. Dorchester, however, was the only one of the three who remained unchanged. Mark had the air of one who had been touched by the fires of inward living. He seemed to have firmed down, to have become at once more thoughtful and perhaps a little less physically inspired with the throb of existence. The lines at the corners of de Fontanay's eyes and mouth were more deeply engraven, an extra grey hair or two had become apparent. He, also, had the air of a man who had faced momentous days. Yet in their conversation there was no note of sadness.

"Is it a diplomatic secret, Mark, or an amatory one,

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as to your disappearance during the last fourteen days?" Henry Dorchester asked, helping himself to *hors d'œuvre*. "We heard about your flight to Paris—you must have been there the night Deselles blew his brains out—and since then, silence."

"There is no particular mystery about my movements," Mark replied. "I am not sufficiently advanced in my profession yet to be sent on secret missions. I was a little bored with life over here, so I wired for some clothes, meaning to stay for a day or two when I'd got through with the little job I went over to Paris about. Then I got a wireless from Hugerson. It seems that Washington wanted him to come back to Drome and see the Minister of Interior about some of these concessions. Hugerson wasn't for it, so he boiled down the thing, and sent me instructions. I had quite a pleasant week in Prince Andropulo's Country, but as the evil fates would have it, of course I was dead up against Dukane all the time. He really had the concessions, but Washington and Wall Street combined naturally enough knew how to put the screw on, and somehow or other I don't fancy he can quite bring off his great coupé."

"Even if he doesn't, I don't think he'll worry much," Dorchester confided. "I heard at the Treasury yesterday that he's just lent another European Country sixteen millions off his own bat, and that his profits in South Africa within the last few months have amounted to more millions than I'd like to repeat. The fellow's a Goliath!" . . .

"What are your future plans, Mark?" Dorchester asked presently.

"If Widdowes wants me, I think I shall stay on

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at the Embassy," Mark confided; "if not, I may go back to New York, and look into my affairs there. One of our partners died recently, and I believe they want someone to look after the European interests of the firm. Anyway, I am going to get a job of a sort."

"You'll find Widdowes lunching here," Dorchester announced. "The whole family are invited to the old Duchess's birthday party—big table in the corner there. They're coming in now."

Mark rose to his feet.

"I must go over and speak to Myra," he said.

"She'll be awfully hurt if you don't," Dorchester agreed. "I'll come along."

The two young men crossed the room. Mark paid his respects to the hostess of the party, with whom he had some slight acquaintance, and afterwards took Myra's hands in his.

"You've made a bad choice," he declared, "and if you'd waited there's no telling what might have happened, but Henry's quite a good sort, all the same. Every kind of good wish to you, Myra."

She laughed up at him.

"Of course I'll break it off any moment you say the word!"

"I've always thought," Dorchester observed, "that I should amazingly like to be the male petitioner in a breach of promise case. Why, I'd break the family, Myra."

She sighed.

"I suppose I shall have to remain faithful, then," she decided. "You'll be here for the wedding, Mark?"

"Sure!" he answered. "I must speak to your father."

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Mr. Widdowes was very gracious indeed.

"I ought to have reported at Carlton House, of course, sir," Mark apologised, "but I only reached Croydon at twelve o'clock, and I had this luncheon engagement here. I was coming round this afternoon."

"That's quite all right," Mr. Widdowes agreed, "look in about four or later, if you like—better later, in case my women-kind take me down to Ranelagh."

The two young men made their adieux, stopped to speak to an acquaintance or two on their way back, and resumed their seats at their own table. Luncheon was a somewhat protracted meal, but conversation chiefly centred round the little social circle in which all three had moved. They spoke no more of serious subjects, until afterwards, when Dorchester had hurried away to motor Myra down to Ranelagh, and de Fontanay and Mark walked arm in arm along Berkeley Street.

"All my life, Mark," de Fontanay confessed, after a silence necessitated by the perilous crossing of Piccadilly, "I shall have one great regret. You know what that is—yet what could I do?"

"You had no alternative, Raoul," Mark declared. "I should have been ashamed of myself all my life if with the evidence in my possession, I had not exposed that plot. It was for Dukane's sake that I gave Deselles his chance."

"It was as well you did," de Fontanay reflected. "We could scarcely have made the first move before he was on his feet in the Senate, and once that proposal had come forward from a man like Deselles, a great part of the mischief would have been done. Frankly, the man I should like to have got at would have been

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Dukane. It was his gold which corrupted the most promising statesman France has had for a long time."

Mark shook his head.

"I'm not so sure, Raoul," he said. "I have been through the papers. The first proposals came from Deselles himself. If you ask me who's to blame, who very nearly wrecked your Country, I should say it was the woman. They have the knack, some of these French women of poisoning the brain and blackening the soul of the man who is really theirs."

"I suppose there was no doubt that Deselles killed her?" de Fontanay mused.

"I should say not the slightest," Mark replied. "Some day, I'll tell you the story of my arrival in Paris, and my interview with Deselles. When he realised the truth, I saw him look at her. He wasn't angry—I don't know what it was in his face—but behind it there was death. Any news of Brennan?"

"He is on his way to South America," de Fontanay confided angrily. "He had the sublime impertinence to send me a wireless of congratulation."

Mark chuckled. They had reached Curzon Street, and de Fontanay was already taking his leave.

"After all," he observed, "Brennan had his points."

Book Three

Chapter XIII

MARK, always beloved of his servants, found cheerful countenances awaiting him in Curzon Street. Andrews

THE LIGHT BEYOND

opened the door, his face wreathed in a welcoming smile. Brandt, the chauffeur was lurking in the hall, hoping for orders. Mrs. Perkins, the housekeeper, who seldom made an appearance, came rustling up to pay her respects. Robert was lingering in the background.

"Everything all right, Andrews?" Mark enquired, after he had shaken hands all round.

"Everything is quite all right, sir."

"Will you be dining at home, sir," Mrs. Perkins asked.

"I should think it's very likely," Mark replied.

"I have no engagements that I know of at present; I will send you word within an hour."

"The cars are all in excellent condition, sir," the chauffeur ventured.

"You can bring the Hispano round," Mark directed.

"I'll just go upstairs, Robert, and change my clothes—have to report at the Embassy later on."

"Certainly, sir. I beg your pardon, though, sir—I ought to have told you before—there is a young lady waiting in the library."

"A what?" Mark gasped.

"A young lady, sir," Robert repeated. "She gave a name, sir, but I didn't quite catch it. She's been here before, though, so I thought I was doing right by letting her in."

Mark took a step forward, and Andrews threw open the door. Estelle was putting the finishing touch to a vase of roses. There were still an armful upon the table.

"Robert, will you bring me another vase, please?" she ordered.

"Estelle!" Mark exclaimed, closing the door behind him.

THE LIGHT BEYOND

She looked up with a start and dropped the roses upon the table.

"Why, they assured me that you weren't expected back until the evening!"

"And if I wasn't—what are——"

He stopped short.

"What am I doing here, I suppose you were going to say? Well, do you know, I called to ask if you were back, and when I saw how bare your rooms looked, I went and bought you some roses from the little shop at the corner of the street. I don't think your house-keeper understands flowers."

He gazed at her in growing astonishment. Then he came slowly forward, and she held out her hands. As he drew nearer his wonder increased. It was Estelle, but surely a different Estelle! There was something in her eyes which he had prayed for, but had despaired of ever seeing, a trembling of the lips, a little uncertainty, a complete abandonment of that gay and wonderful poise, which had always seemed to keep her aloof from the emotions of everyday life.

"Mark, dear," she complained, "how long you have been away, and how wicked you have been—not a single line, and you have been doing your best to ruin us both."

She came into his arms with perfect naturalness, dropping the few remaining roses she had been holding, the perfume of which seemed to fill the room. Her surrender, now that it had arrived, was exquisitely spontaneous, exquisitely complete. Her eyes, her hair, her lips, seemed to find joy in his touch. . . .

"Of course I don't understand a little bit, Estelle," he ventured at last, as he drew her towards the sofa,

THE LIGHT BEYOND

his arm still around her waist. "Do you realise everything that has happened?"

"Of course I do."

"Yet you come to me?"

"Absolutely," she answered. "I think I always meant to come to you in the end."

"But your father?"

"The one thing," she confided as they sat down, "about my father which you have never understood, is that he has a sense of humour."

"A sense of humour?" Mark repeated, a little dazed.

"Exactly. So long as you were trying to ingratiate yourself with him, he was difficult, though he always rather admired your confidence. As soon as you defied him point blank, and threw in your lot with your French friend, spoilt all his schemes, stripped him of about twelve millions, rushed over to Paris and forced that poor man Deselles to commit suicide, he began to rather like you. At any rate, he recognised the fact that you had exceptional qualities."

"But Drome," Mark gasped—"does he know about Drome? Does he know I was sent there on purpose to protest against his concessions, and that I have succeeded in getting most of them cancelled?" She nodded.

"He knows everything," she acknowledged. "To tell you the truth, father and I are both a little fed up with Drome. You see, something has gone wrong about a treaty, and one of father's first conditions was that Drome must gain control of the railways. I don't think the climate would have suited us, and without that twelve millions I'm not at all sure that he would have been in a position to have run a kingdom."

THE LIGHT BEYOND

“ But Andropulo ? The announcement of your engagement appeared in *The Times* only this morning.”

“ The contradiction will be there to-morrow,” she assured him. “ It was the poor young man’s last card. He put it in without telling either of us. I think that it was rather the end of him with father. Anything else you want to know ? ”

“ Just one thing,” he admitted, taking her again into his arms.

She laughed, with her lips lingering close to his.

“ Father declares that you have robbed him of twelve millions,” she whispered, “ you have stripped him of all the concessions in Drome it took him a year and goodness knows how much in bribes to wheedle out of the Drome Ministry—so, knowing all that, if you still find me in your room arranging roses, and you do not realise everything, you must be very foolish ! ”

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